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E S C A P E

STORY OF A YOUNG FUGITIVE IN WWII

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INTRODUCTION

In the last decade or so, thousands of books related to the Holocaust have appeared. Historians have written about the horrors of the period; about acts of armed resistance like the heroic Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and the Jewish partisans; and about the decent and courageous Christian rescuers who saved thousands of Jewish lives. Survivors, meanwhile, have written memoirs about their suffering, their miraculous survival, and their successes in starting anew. While each survivor's story differs in its events and setting, most share a common denominator. The majority of survivors made it through the war due to a combination of fortitude, health and strength, and luck or happenstance. But above all, they survived because the murderers simply ran out of time when the Allies overran the extermination camps. In most cases, survival was due to forces and circumstances beyond the survivor's control.

Less told are the stories about Jews who were active participants in their own survival: those who escaped a ghetto or a camp and survived as fugitives on the Aryan¹ side; those who either through special circumstance, for money or, through their own initiative and daring, took the risks of an escape. Yet, thousands *did* choose the escape path. Historian Gunnar S. Paulsson estimates that in Warsaw alone, at one time or another, there were more than 28,000 Jews living among the Polish population.²

This story of escape and survival is my own story about my life and experiences as a Jewish teenager in Nazi-occupied Europe during World War II. It is about my escape

¹ Originally, the term Aryan was one of the Nazi "racial" definitions to distinguish the Germans from the Jews. During the war, it connoted all non-Jews (e.g., Poles) and all non-Jewish objects (e.g., city districts, appearance, documents). It will be used here, throughout the text, in the latter sense.

² Gunnar S. Paulsson, *Secret City: The Hidden Jews of Warsaw, 1940-1945*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002.

from a small forced labor camp in Tomaszow Mazowiecki, Poland, and my life under false Polish Catholic identities, first in Warsaw and later in Vienna. It is a story about betrayal by friends and rescue by strangers; about a constant fear of being recognized as a Jew, and the struggle for lodging, work, and blending in with the local population; a story of a double life working for opposing Resistance groups and opportunities to help others survive. The story ends with my re-capture during the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, and deportation to a camp in Vienna where, after another escape, I was liberated by the Soviet Army.

Escape to the Aryan side in Poland was neither simple nor easy; not for me and not for the thousands of others who managed to flee. It was hampered by a multitude of risks and conflicts, fears, concerns and preconceptions. As the Nazis herded the Jews into ghettos and, later, labor camps, we did not know, nor could we even imagine what the Nazis had in store for us. We thought that it was a matter of weathering a bad storm, a question of enduring war-dictated hardships, that the war would soon be over. Some entrusted their fate to God and prayed for a miracle to occur. As a result, most of us were slow in recognizing the danger to our lives and hence, a need for any action, including escape. Later, when we learned about the extermination camps most people did not believe it; when the truth was too real to be ignored, tragically, it was too late; escape was then only rarely possible.

In contrast to the risks that escape represented, remaining in a ghetto or camp seemingly had its advantages: a sense of comfort derived from being with family and friends in the same situation; having at least the minimum necessities to live; the illusion that the ghetto *Judenrat* might provide a measure of protection or the hope that Jewish

labor was of such value to the Germans that they would spare our lives. There was solace in predictability and no worries as to where the next meal will come from or where to spend the next night. There were other reasons for not trying to escape. Leaving behind spouses with children, younger siblings, or elderly parents was unthinkable.

For those who did decide to attempt escape, we obsessively worried over how the Poles would receive us. How much support would we need from others? When my money ran out would I be able to get work, without risking exposure? How real was the danger of being blackmailed, denounced, or killed? Like most Jews, I knew very little about the non-Jewish world. Because of centuries of anti-Semitism in Poland, the Aryan side was unfamiliar, mostly perceived as alien or outright hostile world. And we feared most what we knew least.

A major concern was that many Jews lacked what was considered prerequisites for blending with the Polish population: Aryan looks, ability to speak fluent Polish, and contacts with friendly Poles. Although the two communities lived and toiled together on the same land for centuries, they were, in many ways, separate and distinct from each other. Yet, while these concerns were valid and very important, they were not absolute. Neither I, nor any Jew that I knew on the Aryan side, met all of the above requirements.

As I found out later after my escape to Warsaw, German-occupied Poland was particularly fraught with dangers—whether Aryan-looking or not. The act of escape, residing outside the ghetto and possessing false identity papers, all were crimes punishable by death. The same punishment applied to any Pole who either hid or assisted a Jew. Finding safe lodgings, establishing a support network, and just normal living among the local population were daily, perilous challenges. There was a constant fear of

being denounced—by the Germans, by the subservient Polish blue police, or by some from among the ordinary Poles: fascists, collaborators and just plain criminals. Also, gangs of blackmailers on the lookout for hidden Jews roamed the Polish countryside, but were especially prevalent in Warsaw. Besides being caught, betrayed or murdered as a Jew, one could easily be caught or killed as a Pole as well. The Germans carried out frequent “round-ups” on the streets and searched homes for young Polish men to use as hostages, who were then shot as retaliation for acts of resistance.

While the vast majority of Poles was either indifferent to the plight of the Jews or outright hostile towards them, there was also a measure of good will and compassion among many of them. There were thousands of individual Poles, including some pre-war anti-Semites, who, at great personal risk, helped thousands of Jews survive. It is also little known that there were several underground Jewish organizations in Poland that provided financial and other support to escapees, and that there were even some Polish organizations, such as ZEGOTA, dedicated to helping Jews in hiding.

My own experience with Christians on the Aryan side who knew or may have suspected that I was a Jew was, on the whole, more positive than negative. I found that life on the Aryan side, including living conditions, work opportunities, and the blending with the population, was easier, and the chances for survival better, than my friends and I had anticipated. As I recall believing then, on the Aryan side, and as I reflect now with the advantage of hindsight, many more—including my parents, my relatives and friends—could have saved themselves had they taken the path of escape. At least their chances for survival would have been greater. Not everyone would have survived—far from it. Escape from ghettos and camps in Nazi-occupied Poland, even under favorable

circumstances, was a hard and dangerous choice. At best, it was a choice for the few, not for the masses. The danger of being caught on the outside was real and omnipresent. Yet, the alternatives proved to be incomparably worse. We now know, from Paulsson's and others' estimates, that of the 28,000 Jews who hid in Warsaw, 41 percent survived the war as compared to approximately 3 percent, or less, of those who remained in the camps.³

In retrospect, I attribute my survival to a multitude of factors and situations. First, my father had taught me self-trust and self-reliance and that "failure is not a crime but failure to try is." Fortuitous circumstances, lucky choices, a youthful tendency to be daring, some recklessness, and some ingenuity contributed to my being saved. Above all, though, I ascribe my survival to incredible good luck and to meeting several compassionate and courageous people who were willing to help me.

I am writing this story primarily for my family and friends, and I am doing it now before the characters and thoughts fade from my memory and before the events pass into history. I am also telling this story in the firm belief that each testimonial by a witness is as relevant as documentary evidence; that each may shed a different light or offer a new perspective on this tragic yet important historical period, and that their cumulative total may contribute to a better understanding of the tragedy that befell the world during World War II.

³ Leo Cooper, *In the Shadow of the Polish Eagle*. New York: Palgrave Publishers, 2000.

Chapter 1: LEAVING HOME

The war broke out on September 1, 1939 and a few days later, the German Army occupied my hometown of Lodz, the second largest city of Poland, about seventy miles southwest of Warsaw. The prewar population of Lodz (pronounced Wooj) was approximately 750,000 of which one-third was Jewish. Before the war, Lodz was a major industrial city manufacturing mostly high quality textiles—a thriving, prosperous place sometimes called “the Manchester of Poland.” About half of the city’s population was Polish, one third were Jews, 10 percent ethnic Germans, and the remainder were Ukrainians and other minorities. Lodz, as I remember it, was never a pretty city. It was gray and drab, with only few major edifices or palaces, few historical monuments, and three or four large parks. The most specific recollection I have of the city is its skyline dotted with very tall, dark chimneys spewing dark smoke. While the city had an extensive tramway system, buses and cars and taxis, an image that indelibly sticks in my mind is that of horse-driven wagons for transporting goods, and *dorozki*, old-fashioned, horse-driven carriages for people. These carriages competed with each other for space on the narrow city streets, while the concierges, as part of their job and much to their chagrin, constantly collected the horses’ droppings. Yet, my memories of my youth in Lodz are happy ones. I was surrounded by a warm and loving family, mother Bronia, father Feliks and my sister Rena, two years older than me, plus some aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, and neighbors. My life centered on my education—a prime concern of my parents—and was complemented by a few outside activities: occasional sports and several hobbies such

as collecting stamps and butterflies or building model planes, model steamboats, and crystal radios.

Our middle-class milieu was typical; our family always had a maid, we spent every summer vacation in the countryside, and my sister and I attended private high schools. Culturally, my family felt a strong bond to our Jewish identity, traditions, and learning, but had rather fragile ties to Judaism. Only once a year, for the High Holy days, my father and I attended the main city's synagogue. Nationality wise, we felt Polish and thought ourselves to be as good citizens of Poland as anyone else. Although my parents knew Yiddish and used it when speaking with my grandparents, at home we spoke only Polish.

Even as a child, I was aware that there was anti-Semitism in Poland, either by hearing it discussed at home or reading about it in the newspapers. In 1936-7, I read about pogroms in the small town of Przytyk and couple of other towns; I was also well aware of the *Numerus Clausus*: a limit in the admittance of Jews to Polish universities with consequent boycotts of classes by Jewish students and frequent fights with the Polish students. There were other discriminatory measures. My direct exposure to these happenings was limited and inconsequential as the environment in which I lived was predominantly Jewish. In my high school, Szwajcera Gymnasium, only a few employees and two teachers (one of them an ethnic Ukrainian) were Gentiles; all the students were Jewish. At home, the few neighborhood friends I had were Jewish. My parents did have some non-Jewish acquaintances and my father had Gentile business associates but my direct contacts with Poles were limited to our maids (who were mostly country women) and people I met outside my home, in city-wide school events, on Summer holidays, or

during frequent visits to my grandparents in the town of Tomaszow. I remember only one instance of racial discrimination when a friend of mine and I decided to join the YMCA—the only youth club in town with a covered swimming pool. They signed us up but on our second visit, we were told that the directorate had not approved us. No explanations were offered but the reason was clear: we were Jewish. There were also many stores in town with big signs on the doors with the words “Christian Store,” implying that Jews were not welcome; or graffiti on walls and buildings with a recommendation, “Do Not Buy From Jews.” Once, underneath one such graffiti, I saw an added subscript, in parenthesis (“On Credit.”)

From almost day one of the German Army occupation, the walls of the city were plastered with official proclamations—in German and Polish—announcing a variety of restrictions and punishments for non-compliance with the German authorities. The penalty for many violations was death.

Each new restriction affected our daily life a little more: each added a little more pain; each was more severe than the preceding one. It was a tactic we called “slicing the salami”: each day another slice of our freedom was taken away. Some orders applied to the population at large but most were intended only for Jews: all Jews had to wear armbands with the Star of David; Jewish schools were closed; businesses were either shut down or forcibly transferred to Aryan ownership; assets were confiscated. I still vividly remember helping my father carry a large Phillips radio console to a collection center when the possession of radios became illegal. I also remember standing in line at a bank line to exchange 2000 *Bank Polski* zlotys, the maximum allowed per person, for new, *Bank Emisyjny* zlotys. When my sister, Rena, took 2000 zlotys to another bank she came

home crying. As she stood in line, a young German soldier had approached, flirted with her for a few minutes and then offered to do the exchange for her, bypassing the line. After taking her money, he disappeared; she never saw him or the money again.

At home, we built special storage shelves and hiding places and started to gather food. One day, my father arranged to have an enormous barrel of salted herring delivered to our home; he remembered that in World War One, salt became a scarce commodity. Another day, several cases of Wedel chocolate bars were delivered—I guess there was then also a shortage of sugar and sweets. Both supplies came in handy but did not last long.

Within a month or two of the occupation of the city, random beatings in the streets, nightly arrests, and sudden disappearances, especially of prominent community leaders, became commonplace. Punishments ranged from monetary penalties, to torture of those detained, to death. To emphasize the seriousness of non-compliance with the new edicts, three Jewish men, picked up at random, were hanged from specially erected gallows at the Baluty Market, one of the city's public squares. As part of the escalating campaign of terror and as a warning, their bodies were left hanging for several days. With a neighbor, I decided to visit the macabre scene. With a feeling of revulsion, I looked at the lifeless bodies of these innocent men and sensed, for the first, but not the last time, an ice-cold fear in the pit of my stomach.

In late September 1939, my school opened its doors for only one day to announce its “temporary” closure in accordance with the new German edict that all secondary schools must be closed immediately. The school director gave a speech to the assembled students, encouraging us to pursue our education elsewhere, wherever and whenever

possible. “Till we see each other again...” he concluded, his voice audibly trembling with emotion. Neither he nor any of us imagined that this would be the last time we would ever see each other. Distraught, I returned home in tears.

Expecting that worse was still to come, my parents decided it would be wise for the family to move to Tomaszow, my mother’s hometown. Located forty miles from Lodz, my ninety-two-year old maternal grandfather, three aunts—Rena, Rachela, and Celina—and a ten-year-old cousin named Olek lived in Tomaszow in a large two-story house surrounded by a front yard, a vegetable garden on the side, and a fairly large field of arable land in the back. The house, situated at the edge of the town, allowed easy contact with the nearby farms and small villages where food could be purchased outside the ration card system. I had visited my grandfather in the past, usually during the summer holidays with my sister or for family gatherings, and enjoyed this semi-rural area, the fresh air, and the beautiful fields and forests that surrounded his property.

In November, 1939, two months after the war began, and three months after my fifteenth birthday, I was the first in my family to be sent to Tomaszow. I took all my possessions with me, along with as many household goods as the hired truck could carry. My parents, my seventeen-year-old sister Rena, and the rest of the household were to follow later. It was painful and difficult for my parents to suddenly abandon what they have built over two decades: a home and business, their circle of relatives, friends, and neighbors. My father, a wise and talented man, predicted, correctly, that the war would last much longer than people expected; hence, he concluded, this time incorrectly, that there was little need to hurry with the planned family move to Tomaszow. A veteran of the First World War, my father had spent seven years in the Russian Army, of which

three years in Germany as a prisoner of war; but he never anticipated, and not for a moment did he imagine, how quickly the Nazis would impose oppressive and restrictive rules on the Jews and what a terrifying nightmare this war would turn into.

That November, I said goodbye to my parents and sister and left Lodz. At my grandfather's house in Tomaszow I waited patiently for them to join me.

Chapter 2: TOMASZOW

In Tomaszow, I quickly realized that I was the *de facto* head of the household with more duties and responsibilities than I ever thought possible. Almost without noticing, I moved from boyhood to adulthood without the benefits of adolescence. It was not an easy task for a fifteen-year-old “big city” boy who, up to now, had led a sheltered, carefree life and whose only responsibility had been to be a good student in school and to keep good company outside of it. Tomaszow was a quaint, small, textile town on Pilica River, with a population of about 60,000, where the Polish Catholic majority and the Jewish and *Volksdeutsche*⁴ minorities had lived and worked harmoniously for decades. Although most of the people I came in contact with were Jewish, my best friend during the early months of the war was Mirek Stec, the son of a Polish father and a *Volksdeutsche* mother. We were next-door-neighbors and spent entire days together in each other’s houses. We were brought together by the fact that his father was the principal of Elementary School No. 6, and my Aunt Rena was teaching there.

The winter of 1939/40 was bitterly cold. The temperature dropped as low as –15 degrees Fahrenheit, causing our water pipes to freeze. Two or three times a day I had to carry buckets of water from an artesian well half a block away, and by the time I got home the upper layer of water’s surface had frozen solid. Another of my daily tasks was to chop wood each morning for our wood-burning stove. I was also the one who stood in line for bread, margarine, or soap. There was a lot of pushing and shoving in these lines because even though we all had ration cards, there was never enough to go around.

⁴ The *Volksdeutsche* were Polish by birth and citizenship but were of German descent; predominantly Protestant.

During the first months, though life was difficult and challenging, it was bearable. We had enough food for regular meals, most utility services were available, and there were no major physical restrictions on our daily movements. The only notable changes to our life were the general curfew hour and the requirement that Jews wear a white armband with a Star of David in public. Otherwise, during the day people would meet with relatives and friends, read books, or engage in endless discussions of current events. Sometimes we traveled to nearby villages or towns to supplement whatever food or other products were not obtainable on ration cards. I felt completely unprepared for my new role, but generally content, waiting for my parents and sister to join me shortly. In the meantime, I corresponded with my family at least twice a week, exchanging greetings and keeping each other informed about the deteriorating situation in both towns.

But, within weeks after my departure, major changes occurred in my hometown: the city was renamed Litzmannstadt and it was incorporated, together with its surrounding area, into the Third Reich. Most importantly, there were new German restrictions for the Jews, including among them that all travel out of the city was prohibited. Gradually, I lost communication with my parents. At first, the frequent correspondence dwindled to an occasional, pre-printed, signed postcard reporting, "All is well here, wish the same for you." Then, the transfers of money, which I was getting once a month, became erratic and finally stopped. It became increasingly apparent that, at least for the time being, I would have to take charge of my future and start making my own decisions much sooner than I had planned.

The first decision I made under these new circumstances regarded the continuation of my education. In Tomaszow, as elsewhere, clandestine classes were being

held for about eight to ten Jewish students at private homes in the evenings. We had lectures and homework, and we studied using old textbooks, but of course there were no school facilities. In addition, since curfew was at 9 P.M., the study sessions were short.

The school did not last long, however. After a few weeks, upon leaving one of the homes, our group was met by a bunch of uniformed *Hitlerjugend*, thugs from the local German youth organization, armed with pipes, chains and sticks. A fight ensued and, I'm sorry to say, we lost. Bloodied, with our books and notebooks stuffed under our coats, we eventually managed to escape into the dark of night. But this incident marked the end of the clandestine schooling as no parent was willing to host such classes; it also marked the end of my secondary education for the rest of the war, and, as it turned out, forever. From now I had to turn to the only other alternative: to enter the work force.

Ten months after moving to Tomaszow, at the age of sixteen, I went to work for a local construction company, whose superintendent was a friend of my Aunt Rena, a man named Mr. Sowinski. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man who projected physical strength and authority. Aryan firms were prohibited from employing Jews except under special circumstances, when particular qualifications were indispensable, which, of course, was not my case. But Mr. Sowinski accepted the risk and hired me out of friendship for my aunt. As it was illegal for me to work there, each day, when I left for work, I took off my Jewish armband and took on the identity of a Catholic Pole. I had to be careful not to be recognized by anyone who knew me as a Jew, as they might give away my true identity. It helped that I was a newcomer to the town, so not many people knew me; besides, conscious of who I was, I worked hard at being inconspicuous, staying

on the sidelines and avoiding idle conversation with my co-workers, who knew me by my first name, Zenon, a Polish name.

I was employed by the construction company for more than a year. Working for this Aryan firm, located close to the edge of town, had advantages beyond being a paid job. Because of its location, I was able to barter directly with peasants from the nearby villages, buying food or trading household items in exchange for food.

I performed a variety of jobs, from digging ditches and laying foundations to painting and roofing the finished structure. The work was demanding and hard but I was young, healthy, and eager to learn new trades. One of my first jobs was assisting bricklayers by carrying mortar and bricks up the scaffold and loading and unloading hundred-pound cement sacks. Though this was hard, difficult work, especially for someone who had never done manual labor before, these jobs were easy compared to my next task.

It was the winter of 1940-41 when I was assigned to the ice retrieval and storage project, after only a few months in the construction firm. Since Tomaszow was a small town and a relatively primitive one, home refrigeration consisted of iceboxes. Thus, it was necessary to store ice pieces during the winter for distribution in the summer. The ice pieces were retrieved from nearby frozen lakes and transported to a storage facility, a specially built pit. The storage site was located in the backyard of a large apartment building on Krzyzowa Street, close to the center of town. The pit was a 40 foot by 40 foot, hole in the ground, four-stories deep, with a low, inclined roof about three feet above ground at the edges. There were three or four small openings between the roof and the ground through which the ice pieces were tossed into the pit. There was a stairway to

get inside the pit, a rickety, wooden scaffold that looked like a zigzagging ladder in a chicken house.

For the first part of the job we stood in the middle of the frozen lake and broke the layer of ice into pieces; we then carried the pieces to the waiting trucks. At first, the ice we stood on was dry but, as the hole in the ice grew bigger, the water from underneath rose up and spread over the surface, so that, after a few hours, we were walking in up to two inches of ice-cold water. This task was followed by a half-an-hour ride to the Krzyzowa facility, sitting on the ice pieces. That, plus the low winter temperatures and the wind-chill, made us into human icicles by the time we arrived. The job was not only tough but could also be dangerous. One afternoon, one of our co-workers slipped and quickly slid into the ice-cold lake. Frantically, he shouted for us to help him but, despite our efforts, we were unable to save him. We watched helplessly as he disappeared under the freezing water. The company notified his family but that was all. The next day a new employee took his place.

The second part of my job was to stand on the ice at the bottom of the pit, break the incoming blocks of ice into smaller pieces and, using a heavy mallet (a large tree trunk with a handlebar attached to it), pound layer upon layer of ice into the rising floor. Sawdust was spread between the layers of ice, to prevent the pieces from adhering to each other. The pit was almost completely dark, lit only by one small electric light bulb, the temperature was always below freezing, and the humidity constantly high.

This work was hard and monotonous. I worked ten to twelve hours a day, usually with one other person. My shoes and feet were always cold and wet and chills penetrated my body to the bone. I went home so cold and tired that I would lie down just for a short

rest, without taking off my clothes, too exhausted to even eat dinner, only to wake up the next morning, in time for a new day of work. Needless to say, only the very strong and very healthy survived these conditions for more than a month or two. Although I was young, strong, and healthy, I still had to ask for a reassignment.

My new assignment was another construction job that took me to Ujazd, a little town about ten miles from Tomaszow. I was brought there by truck each morning and returned home, to Tomaszow in the evening. The construction site, about a square mile area, was located in the midst of a densely wooded forest, with a railroad track siding. There were all kinds of buildings going up, barracks and permanent brick structures. I was back working as a bricklayer's helper, once again carrying bricks and mortar up the ladder. Polish workers under German supervision did most of the work, although some work was also done by German paramilitary personnel from the Organization TODT.⁵

I was still working there in the summer of 1941, when, after the start of the conflict between Germany and Russia, the construction site became a transit camp for Russian prisoners of war. The prisoners arrived in cattle cars in ever-greater numbers, thousands upon thousands. Some of the prisoners were assigned to work with us, and, with this daily contact, I began to pick up some Russian vocabulary and phrases. The big problem, however, was that this site was in no way prepared to house and feed such a large number of prisoners: there was little food available, the water—which was obtained from a few existing, hand-operated pumps on top of the wells—was insufficient, there were hardly any barracks or tents for the prisoners to sleep in, and finally, the prisoners had no hygienic facilities.

⁵ Organization TODT was the largest construction and armament company in Germany; part of German Ministry of Armament. It was responsible for providing construction labor and supplies for the German army.

The captured soldiers were imprisoned here in the middle-of-nowhere and left to fend for themselves. Within weeks, even days, we encountered sick, starving, and dead prisoners when we arrived for work in the morning. The bodies were scattered everywhere; the stench was unbearable. This was my first personal experience of Nazi Germany's inhumanity to man on a large scale. In Ujazd, thousands, if not tens of thousands, of Russian prisoners starved to death and were then buried in mass graves without a trace.

Yet, as brutal as the Germans were everywhere, including in Ujazd, I experienced, quite by accident, a dose of human kindness from one of these Germans that made an indelible mark on my thinking and even on my character. Paul Biebow, a middle-aged, paramilitary man who was my supervisor, liked to engage me in short conversations. We spoke in German as I had studied it in school and had heard my father, who was fluent in the language, speak it often at home with his friends. At first, Mr. Biebow would start the conversation with a question about my family or me, or on a more general subject, such as our accommodations in Tomaszow. When he found out that my parents were in Lodz he wanted to know about them and why we were separated. "When was the last time you saw your parents?" he would ask or "Have you heard from them?" I answered in my broken German, wondering why someone was taking such a personal interest in me.

Soon this developed into a "father-son" relationship. Every day, as I arrived at the compound with a group of other workers, he stood in the doorway of his office building and call out for me to join him. Once there, he would take me to a dark corner of the hallway, out of sight of the others, and fill my pockets with a variety of items: a can of food, a chocolate bar, or cigarettes. One day, I mentioned casually that I had a toothache.

The next morning he had money ready for me with “instructions” to see a dentist immediately. Initially, I was a bit wary of associating with a German, but, eventually, I looked forward to both our conversations and the gifts.

After a time, his kindness prompted me to reveal my true identity and my illegal status in Ujazd to him. Unaware of the risks of doing so, I assumed that he was a friend and, therefore, could be trusted. My instinct turned out to be correct, fortunately for me, and our relationship continued on as before even after I confided in him. Although I was too shy to ask him directly, I often wondered why he was doing it. The only clue he ever gave me was when he mentioned that one of his sons, a boy approximately my age, was fighting on the Russian front. Perhaps by his kindness to me he was hoping that someone in Russia would be as compassionate to his son. Perhaps he was just a good man.

By the end of August, 1941, after having worked illegally for more than a year, going to work for the construction company and pretending to be a Pole became too dangerous. The Jewish quarter, previously a largely ill-defined ghetto, was becoming more and more closely guarded. The Jewish Order Police and German police with dogs were posted at strategic points; leaving the area without the armband or without authorization could mean death. I now had no other option but to quit my job.

Within four months, the Jewish quarter of Tomaszow was transformed into a closed, walled ghetto. Shortly thereafter, the entire Jewish population of Tomaszow, about 13,000 in total, was forced to find accommodations within this quarter, a small and impoverished area, already overcrowded, with many wooden houses and no running water. A few houses and apartments were vacant because the Polish inhabitants had to

move out of the area. In many cases, people were assigned to move in with relatives and friends or to sublet.

The allocation process was harrowing. Everyone wanted larger and better quarters and everybody felt more deserving than the next person. People quarreled with the Jewish Council (*Judenrat*) members, with the Jewish Order Police, and, most of all, with each other. Sometimes there were physical fights to prevent allocations from being carried out. The best accommodations went to relatives and friends of the council members, to other people with influence, and to those who knew how and whom to bribe. I did not count much at all because I was an outsider. In the end, my grandfather, aunts, cousin, and I had to move from our big, comfortable two-story house to two small, one-bedroom apartments. I stayed in one of them with my Aunt Rena and cousin Olek.

When I could no longer sneak out or be seen outside the ghetto without the required armband, I looked for, and soon found, work inside the ghetto as a carpenter. I hardly knew what carpentry was all about, but, luckily, the requirements to prove one's qualifications were very lax. My new job with the Org. TODT, near Polna Street, paid me a small salary and, even more importantly, provided a measure of safety. When requested, the Germans of the Org. TODT issued an employment certificate (*Ausweis*), which protected the bearer from being assigned to a forced labor battalion.

Life in the ghetto grew increasingly worse. Food supplies were meager. People lived from hand to mouth, never knowing where their next meal was coming from, and many began to die from malnutrition. To supplement the food obtained on ration cards, people, including my family, sold personal and household possessions and made purchases on the flourishing black market. I did not know the finances of my relatives,

but apparently we could afford the supplements. Almost anything was available, and some very rare items, like coffee beans or tobacco, were found more easily in the ghetto than outside. There were a few instances when German supervisors at work, through a Jewish intermediary (and on occasion I was that intermediary), purchased coffee beans or tobacco for shipment to his family in Germany.

Another source of supplemental food was the packages from relatives abroad that we were allowed to receive in the early months of the war. Wonderfully nutritious and scrumptious packages came to us from Vilnius, Lithuania, annexed then by Russia, from my Aunt Rena's husband, Julian. Three of my uncles, Julian, Henryk (Aunt Marysia's husband), and their brother-in-law Max, had fled to Russia when the war broke out. They were among tens of thousands of other Jewish men—mostly young or middle-aged—who crossed over to Russia because they were afraid of becoming forced laborers for the Nazis.¹ Packages weighed up to ten kilos and contained myriad food items, such as smoked meats and bacon, canned foods, bars of chocolates and biscuits. Sometimes there were even lemons and oranges, items unavailable in the ghetto. Similar packages, but fewer, arrived from our Uncle Enrico in Italy. As a Jew, he, too, was in a camp but what a different camp it must have been, for him to be able to send packages full of delicacies to us!

A few days before Christmas 1941, the German who had befriended me at the labor camp, Mr. Biebow, unexpectedly came to the ghetto gate, requested that a Jewish policeman on guard find me, and then delivered an enormous Christmas package that had been prepared by his wife, back in Germany; it was brimming with canned food,

¹ They remained in Russia for part of the war, later spending some time in Japan, Burma and India and, finally, towards the end of the war, migrating to Palestine.

homemade cookies, and even winter clothing. I was completely overwhelmed by this kind gesture, and extremely grateful for the contents. Just bringing it to the gates of the ghetto was courageous, an act that restored in me some measure of faith in humanity.

As conditions deteriorated, it was not long before a typhus epidemic swept through the ghetto, felling dozens of people daily, including my grandfather. He was admitted to the hospital but we were not allowed to visit him as the hospital was quarantined. His daughters bribed the nurses to deliver to him some of his favorite dishes in the hope that the home cooking would help him recover his health. Invariably, the nurses came back telling us how much he enjoyed the food and that he asked for more. And so we sent more. In spite of his advanced age, my grandfather got better and was released. It was only then that we learned that he had never tasted, or even seen, any of his favorite dishes; the nurses, not expecting him to live and tell, had consumed every meal that we had sent to the hospital. A few days after his release, my grandfather died, at the age of ninety-four. Out of thirty family members who died during the war, he was the only one who died of natural causes.

It was not only drastic food shortages and disease that made life in the ghetto so chaotic and perilous. My memory of the men rounded up in Lodz and hanged on the gallows was revived as random executions started to occur, mostly targeting the so-called intelligentsia: teachers, doctors, lawyers, and engineers, those perceived by the Germans as potential organizers and leaders of a resistance. Once, in the middle of the night, I was awakened by gunshots. In the morning, on my way to work, I saw the results: several bodies lying motionless on the sidewalk near my house, in pools of blood. My heart seemed to stop beating for a second as I realized that I recognized three of the victims.

Two of them were brothers, both lawyers, by the name of Hirschbrung. The third was the son of one of the lawyers. I later learned from witnesses that when the Gestapo agent came to take the men away, the son ran after him, begging him not to kill his father. That is the moment when he, too, died.

But, regardless of my sorrow, it was too dangerous to show any sympathy for the victims. My stomach churning, I, like the few other passersby, simply walked across the street to my workplace as if the bodies did not exist, numbed by helplessness.

In spite of the ever-increasing restrictions, constant abuses, deprivations, and sufferings, most of the inhabitants in the ghetto attempted to make the best of a bad situation. Unable to physically resist, people showed a remarkable moral defiance through their composure and resilience. Life moved on. In the first and second year after the ghetto was formed, we all tried hard to maintain some semblance of normalcy.

To alleviate some of the gloominess of our lives we sought refuge in self-organized entertainment and cultural activities. Discussion and reading groups were formed, lectures were given, and young budding intellectuals organized an amateur theatre. This latter group performed their own satirical sketches, poking fun at themselves and those around them, at our own ghetto leaders and sometimes, in a subtle way, ridiculing our oppressors. A young man with straight blond hair and deep greenish eyes, Adas Lichtenstein, was a major contributor to the literary and theatrical evenings. Highly

intelligent and talented, he wrote satirical sketches and poems and was particularly known for adding new lyrics to old songs, all poking fun at our times and our rulers.

People wrote poems and songs, exhibited their paintings, and engaged in political debates. We had political groups covering the entire gamut of opinions, from left to right. More often, for entertainment, the younger people gathered in the evening in someone's home and, accompanied by an instrument such as a guitar, sang Yiddish or Polish songs, both old and new. Sometimes, if enough people knew the words, we sang Russian songs or, sometimes, even German, such as *Unter die Laterne (Lili Marlene)* by Marlene Dietrich and heard on a clandestine radio.

Participation in this illegal entertainment and cultural activities made us feel that even if physically oppressed, in spirit we had been neither subjugated nor defeated. With time, all these activities, as well as the receiving of food packages ceased. Like Pavlov's gradual conditioning of animals, each day brought a new restriction, a diminishing supply, one more turn on the tightening screw. In every way, we had "too much to starve, but not enough to live."

Chapter 3: AKIBA CELL

One spring evening in 1941, before the Jewish quarter in Tomaszow had been turned into a closed ghetto, Tusia Fuchs, a former classmate in the clandestine school I had attended, came to visit me. Tusia was plain, intelligent, vivacious, and unusually well read girl, and the purpose of her visit was quickly explained; an invitation to a secret meeting of several young people to be held the following Sunday in an abandoned garden shack on Krzyzowa Street. I didn't know the purpose of the meeting, the identities of the other participants or what to expect. But, intrigued by the mystery and secrecy surrounding the invitation, I agreed to go.

Twelve of us attended: six boys and six girls, all between the age of fifteen and eighteen. I soon learned that the common characteristics of the participants were that we were all young and healthy, presumably trustworthy, we all spoke unaccented Polish and had no discernible Semitic features, and were known to be eager to take some action. The importance of the language and physical features qualities soon became clear: one of the main goals of the group was to escape from the ghetto and blend in with the Polish population at large. We planned to either join the underground resistance movements that were forming in the cities and forests of Poland or try to survive under assumed identities. In either case, escape was only possible for those who could pass as Gentiles. I was probably invited to join the group primarily because I met these requirements; as I was new in town, most of the others did not know much else about me.

The group's name was AKIBA² and its main objectives were resistance, defiance, and survival through active effort and self-reliance—anything but passive submission. Anything but compliance. Our leader and organizer was Yitzhak Rosenblat, an eighteen-year-old likeable redhead, slightly built, with a light complexion and freckles. He limped as a result of childhood polio, but despite his physical limitations, he was unfettered when it came to taking charge. Mild mannered, with a strong character, he had all the makings of a born leader. Intelligent and articulate, he inspired in us trust and confidence. Most importantly, he inspired us to action.

While the group was apolitical, the members ran the gamut of the political party spectrum, as did our discussion topics and the views of our members. During our weekly meetings, we discussed the progress of the war and the latest German victories. We talked about the increasingly oppressive measures across occupied Poland and the particularly bad situation in the ghetto. We tried to extrapolate from the current state of affairs what might happen next and what should be done to prevent it. Some of us doubted that anything could be done. One girl wondered how God could have allowed this terrible situation to happen. Another boy philosophized that Jews had always been persecuted—they had survived many misfortunes before and they would survive this adversity too. Others reaffirmed their dream to go to Palestine: “War or no war,” one young boy told the group, “we must work towards building a Jewish State.” An ardent Zionist, he held up this goal like a beacon to be followed at every meeting.

Still others discussed how, after we would make our escape, we could join the Partisans in the woods or cross the border into Russia, where we would presumably be

² The group was named after a Rabbi and a spiritual leader during the Bar Kochba revolt in the second century of C.E. AKIBA was also the name of a Zionist organization.

safe. Though Russia was allied with Germany at that time and was considered an enemy of Poland, they were known to not single out Jews for discrimination. During the early months of the war, the Russians allowed tens of thousands of Jews to cross from the German-occupied Polish territory to that occupied by the Soviets, as my uncles had done. Despite the fact that we had nothing solid to support such plans, we thought that these were real options. We were young and inexperienced and determined not to sit back—we were determined to take action.

The discussions became most animated when we dwelled on the lack of leadership by the community Elders. Many of us voiced disappointment, even anger, that the members of the *Judenrat* did not have the necessary qualities to deal with the situation. They were mostly middle-aged or older and had been selected because they were well known in the community; some were drawn from the religious *Kehila*. While a few were opportunists, most of them were honest, intelligent, and well meaning, but, to us, they were hopelessly unequal to the task. We complained that they were either weak and subservient, or corrupt and self-serving; that often they appeared to collaborate with the Germans in our mistreatment. The *Judenrat* seemed unable, or unwilling, to attend to our current needs and did not impart any confidence that they could be entrusted with our future. We thought that, even under occupation, our human rights should be respected and, impatient to take some sort of action, we expected some contrariness, some semblance of resistance; but the *Judenrat* never took any action to oppose the rulers. They remained to the last, accommodating and passive, leaving the population hopeless and helpless.

We also lamented our own inactivity. Yitzhak in particular commanded us to take initiative, to take our fate into our own hands, and, focused on this idea, he single-handedly brought us back to it whenever someone would stray onto other subjects. I tended to sit on the sidelines and listen rather than talk. I had never been involved in a political party, much less activities. I was also intimidated because I was from out of town and had known the members of the group for only a short time; the others knew each other well from before the war and many went to the same school. However, I was sure of one thing—I was decidedly in Yitzhak’s camp. I too was ready to act.

Many ideas were tossed around but few were practical. We thought that we should engage in some form of sabotage. I proposed cutting the telephone wires that the German military had strung on trees along a nearby highway, from Tomaszow to Piotrkow. The idea was received enthusiastically at first. Then, we all realized that we could do it only after dark—but, since it was summer, darkness fell after the nine o’clock curfew hour. Passive resistance—a slowdown or shoddy performance in the workplace—was an option open to us but already commonly practiced. As for other actions that were suggested, including acts of armed resistance, they were more an expression of our youthful exuberance than practical and real possibilities. As willing as we were to take necessary chances, these risks were too great and we were too inexperienced. We had no weapons and there was no way for us to obtain any. Our only strength was our will to act.

Our many discussions led to one conclusion: we must leave the ghetto. Since staying on was unacceptable and any resistance impossible, escape was our only option. On this we all agreed. The next key question was: what concrete steps could we take? We agreed with the lofty principles but we were at a loss about how to reach them.

Yitzhak provided most, although far from all, of the answers. In a lengthy but clear speech during our last meeting he summarized our feelings and our conclusions. He defined the immediate goals and spelled out the practical steps that we must take:

“We must free ourselves from this nightmare. We are helpless here, lacking numbers, lacking means, lacking adult leadership. Physical resistance is out of the question. Our group has no military experience and lacks all the prerequisites for any effective action. We cannot expect help to come. But we cannot also sit idly by. We must prepare for our escape by relying primarily on our own resources. Once we are outside the ghetto, outside the city of Tomaszow, we can join other movements, an underground that is already in existence. But we must escape first. There is no other way. It won’t be easy to abandon the security of our homes in exchange for the uncertainty of the unknown. It will take all our strength and all the courage we can muster, but this is our only chance. To remain here is worse. If only a fraction of the rumors we hear proves true, we are all doomed.”

Yitzhak seemed to have had a sixth sense about our agenda and our ultimate objectives and he expressed himself with great clarity. He inspired all of us to individual action. “Rely on yourself. Take the reins of your survival into your own hands. Escape is the only path to survival.”

To test conditions on the Polish side, to determine general opportunities for escape, as well as to get a sense of the difficulties that awaited us, the group decided to send out a couple of scouts. Tusia was the first volunteer to be sent out into the Aryan side, picked for her resourcefulness and courage. She had pre-war contacts in the city of Krakow, as before the war, she had belonged to a national youth organization there. She

was also the right candidate because she was a girl— if caught, a boy could have easily been proven Jewish because of his circumcision.

Tusia's mission was to find and establish contacts with other underground organizations, to set up a communication channel with them and to obtain Polish ID cards for the rest of us. We all contributed funds for the trip, supplied her with our pictures and personal data, and, tearfully, bid her farewell. Deep down, every one of us envied her.

Twice she returned to Tomaszow to inform the group about the underground contacts she had made and to collect additional personal data for the Polish documents. Everything seemed to be going well. Our spirits were rising as we felt that we were making progress. But when Tusia returned to the ghetto for a third time, she brought bad news.

"The Nazis are destroying the small ghettos and herding Jews into ghettos in larger cities. Some people have disappeared without a trace. There are rumors that there have been mass executions: that they are forcing people into the woods and killing them, burying them in mass graves," she continued. "What they call Resettlement Camps are nothing more than extermination camps. You must tell the others what is happening to our people." I wasn't totally surprised by the news, yet, nonetheless, I was disturbed. Her warning reinforced our group's determination to proceed with our plans to escape.

Yitzhak and other members approached the *Judenrat* Elders to pass on the information we had received. We tried to warn them but were rebuffed and branded as "panic mongers." We were advised not to spread such bad, unsubstantiated news.

"It is unthinkable!" they scolded us, "No one will believe such rumors." We remained silent.

After her last trip, we lost track of Tusia. Some time later, Halinka Rubinek, a tall, Aryan-looking girl, with dark hair and blue eyes, followed in her footsteps. She found out that Tusia had lived for a while in Krakow, working diligently on our behalf until, one day, she was caught by the Germans, shot and killed. After her first trip back to report about Tusia, Halinka also disappeared; no one knows what happened to her. Afterwards, a boy from our group, Marek, left the ghetto in search of contacts; his destination was Warsaw. He, too, disappeared without a trace.

Chapter 4: TOMASZOW LABOR CAMP

By mid 1942, I was transferred from the Polna street workshop to a furniture factory (*Tischlerei*), a large firm located within the ghetto, managed and operated by Org. TODT, which produced cabinets and furniture for the German war machine. Mr. Kramer, a short, heavy-set man with a jovial and kind face, was head of the plant. His rank, I was told, was equivalent to a General in the regular army. He, like all the other Org. TODT members, wore a green uniform, in contrast to the gray uniform of the German army, with a distinct display of the Nazi swastika on his arm. About four hundred people were employed there: some Germans, some Poles, but mostly Jews.

At first, I was a laborer on the floor, carrying heavy wooden boards from the lumberyard to where the machinery was. It was a hard and tedious job. But soon I was “promoted,” landing a job as an assistant to the factory’s chief electrician. He was a local Pole, tall and slender, taciturn but fair-minded. The new job was anything but boring: each day I learnt new concepts in the magic field of electricity and became familiar with new machinery and new tools. I was learning a trade.

About the same time as I was starting my new job, rumors spread throughout the ghetto that the entire Jewish population of Tomaszow would be deported, or “resettled” as the Germans referred to it. With time, these rumors became more frequent and more credible. Many such “resettlements” had already happened in other cities, small and large.

The official line from the Nazis was that the Jews were being sent to the newly won Russian territories, where they would be housed and gainfully employed. It was easy

to envision that the war campaign in Russia left vast areas devastated and in need for reconstruction. It was also a fact that thousands inside the ghettos were highly skilled artisans who were now idle and could satisfy that need. Thus, the German plans appeared to have elements of rationality. To make it even more believable, the Germans encouraged people to take with them household items, such as linen, towels, pots and pans, and for trades people, their tools. They assured everyone that all these items would be needed.

The grapevine, however, told a very different story: the “resettlers” were sent to concentration camps, or worse, to extermination camps. But the fact was that nobody knew for sure. Even when faced with eye-witness accounts from returning train operators and a few who had managed to escape, people did not give credence to it. It was difficult to think the unthinkable; it was difficult to believe the unbelievable.

One day, at the beginning of November 1942, the rumors of worse to come became a reality for the Jews of the Tomaszow.

It was a clear, lightly overcast morning on a typical November day, a little chilly and gray. That morning, starting about 10 A.M., the population of the ghetto, about twelve to thirteen thousand men, women, and children, was herded into a large assembly area adjacent to the furniture factory. Slowly and in silence the assembly area filled up. As if in a daze, they sat on the ground, each family surrounded by a mound of suitcases, boxes or duffle bags. Helplessly, we observed the steadily increasing mass of people from the upper floor windows of the factory. The early arrivals had been there for several hours now. Without food or water, except for what each brought with them, in fear and uncertainty as to their fate, they waited, motionless and silent. Among them were my

three aunts, Rena, Rachel, and Celina, and my now eleven-year-old cousin, Olek, a few more distant relatives, and many friends and neighbors.

I did not even have a chance to say good-bye to them. The previous day, unexpectedly and without explanation, the managers at the *Tischlerei* told us to remain on the grounds for the night. We, and all the other workers from the ghetto working for German firms—a total of about eight hundred mostly young men and women—were exempt from the deportation.

In the middle of the afternoon, those assembled were marched to the railroad station, about two miles away, and loaded into cattle cars. There, again they stood, crammed together like sardines, without food, unable to relieve themselves, until sunset. At the end of the day the trains left for an unknown destination. Weeks later the news filtered in that the destination for the “resettlers” had been Treblinka, a place of which I, as well as most others, had never heard.

The remainder of us, a few hundred Jews from Tomaszow, camped on the grounds of our workplace for two or three days. Then, early one morning, accompanied by German and Jewish police, we were herded into one corner of the ghetto, in the shabbiest part of town where the poorest of the poor had once lived. The houses were small and dilapidated with no running water and a minimum of furniture and bedding. Chaos prevailed. Since we were left with nothing but what we had on our backs, people fought bitterly for every piece of scrap, every piece of house ware, and every piece of clothing.

There were similar fights for accommodations. We were left to ourselves to select a room or a tiny apartment from a cluster of shacks, usually with two or more other

people. A few structures that appeared to be of slightly higher quality were already occupied. One housed a now reduced-in-size *Judenrat*; another, the Jewish Order Police or the communal kitchen. Most apartments were in disarray with the entrance door open; others were tidier and with a padlock on the door: the owners expected to return. The Jewish Police were supposed to keep order but they were nowhere to be seen. They were busy requisitioning places for their relatives or friends. I ended up in a complex on No. 6, Piekarska Street and landed an apartment with two other men, both casual acquaintances: one, a boy even younger than myself, and the other, a man of about forty. The latter, Mr. Czernow, was sadness personified. He had just lost his wife and three children in the deportation and was in a permanent, inconsolable daze.

In this new, smaller version of misery, we had electricity but water had to be brought in from artesian wells with hand pumps, in buckets. Once a day, after work, a community kitchen provided food. Occasionally we would cook some soup, real soup, with potatoes bought on the black market, rather than the potato peels we received at the factory or from the communal kitchen. For cooking, we used wooden stoves—rather primitive contraptions with a long, modular pipe that carried the smoke exhaust to the outside. For sanitary facilities, we had outhouses.

This new area became the Tomaszow Labor Camp. It was surrounded by barbed wire and guarded twenty-four hours a day by armed Ukrainian soldiers belonging to the Auxiliary Ukrainian Army. Although Yitzhak and the few remaining members of AKIBA, including myself, remained in this camp, our AKIBA activities ceased. We had lost our contacts with the outside and with each other. Although the labor camp was not very big—just a few city blocks—hard labor and long working hours combined with

difficult living conditions were not conducive to social contacts and much less to organized political activities. My time after work was spent by first collecting a bowl of soup with some bread at the communal kitchen and, then, getting rested for the next day.

A couple of my relatives, Rysia and Felek, were among those exempted from the Treblinka transport and were now in the camp. But, although they were cousins of mine, we were not close. They each had a spouse still in the camp, worked in a different place—Felek was a policeman—and I rarely saw them. Without my aunts and Olek, I felt very alone.

At the factory, I met a boy about my age by the name of Ignac whose reputation of being as strong as a horse and as stubborn as a mule fit him well. He was rather ugly looking but quiet, thoughtful, and, as I soon found out, frugal, intelligent, dependable, and diligent. I often gave him half of my soup as he was also always hungry. I was glad to give it away as to me it was terribly tasteless. Ignac had a contagious smile and a dry sense of humor. Fortunately, Ignac was always willing to do more than his share, carry the heaviest suitcase, take on the heaviest workload, do whatever was needed. In spite of some differences, Ignac and I became close friends, almost soul mates. We complemented and needed each other.

One day during our lunch break, I confided in him my desire to flee from this miserable and hopeless existence despite the fact that there did not appear to be any immediate danger to our lives. People really did not know where their families had been deported or what had happened to them, hence, running away was not on everyone's mind. But for me, ever since my AKIBA experience, there was no other option but to escape. The only questions were how and how soon.

I proceeded to tell Ignac what it would take to put an escape plan into action, imparting to him what I had learned at the AKIBA meetings. Ignac must have already had similar thoughts because it did not take much for us to come together about this in full agreement. Almost instantaneously, he became my co-planner and co-conspirator, and a couple of weeks later, a second assistant to the chief electrician of the factory.

Neither one of us knew anything about being an electrician. We bumbled through the first few weeks not knowing a voltmeter from a circuit breaker. But we worked and learned well together, complemented each other's talents, or lack thereof, and most importantly, were completely in concert regarding the need to escape. Our utmost priority, I told him, was to obtain important Polish documents: we needed a *Kennkarte*, which was numbered and fingerprinted and included a photo; we needed a labor card showing employment, and we needed a certificate stating that we were on vacation or traveling for our company. The labor card was critical to show that we were gainfully employed; it was needed to obtain ration cards, travel permits and other assistance. The certificate document was necessary since we expected to be away from the place of employment indicated on the labor card.

Since we already worked for a German company, we started with the labor card. Our first approach was simple: we would steal it. We thought this easy enough so we did not even consider other alternatives. We knew that all Polish workers in the factory had to have a labor card. We also knew that once a week, late on Friday, these cards were collected and registered by a supervisor and then returned to their owners. Our simple plan consisted of stealing a couple of these cards when they were on the supervisor's desk during the registration process. Our challenge was to stage some kind of an

emergency in order to get him out of his office, rush in while he was gone, locate the documents, and pocket them. Afterwards, we would resume our duties as though nothing had happened.

Two locations were involved: the supervisor's office, a wooden barrack that was located in the courtyard close to the periphery of the plant, and a utility room, containing maintenance and control equipment for the plant's electrical power that was a hundred yards away. The main circuit breaker, controlling all lighting and all electrical machinery in the plant, was located in the latter.

One Friday evening after dark, Ignac loitered in the vicinity of the supervisor's office; I was in the utility room. At a prearranged time, with a simple motion of my hand, I pulled down the main electrical switch. Throughout the plant all lights went out and all of the machines came to a sudden halt. As the supervisor ran out to look for the electricians (Ignac and me), Ignac entered his office and randomly took two labor cards from a pile on his desk. When the supervisor reached the utility room, he found me already there. I was at the main switch, frantically trying to find the problem, which I "found" within minutes. The electricity to the factory was restored, and the supervisor complimented me on my prompt and efficient response.

Afterwards, Ignac and I congratulated each other on our accomplishment. "Success!" we declared. The plan had come off without a hitch—or so it seemed.

We soon discovered that we had seriously miscalculated. Both cards belonged to people who were at least fifteen years older than we were, and their birth dates were on the cards. At eighteen, even with the best of disguises, we could not pass for middle-aged men.

We thus decided to change our *modus operandi*: first we would find a fellow in our own age bracket, and only then would we attempt to steal his labor card. I soon found a young man who worked in the company's boiler room by the name of Alfons Machowiak. One day, during lunch hour, while Ignac engaged Alfons in a conversation in the courtyard, I entered the boiler room, found Alfons's jacket, and simply pulled the labor card out of his breast pocket. This new approach worked well. Alfons would have to report a lost document, which, without much difficulty, would be replaced, while I had been rewarded with my first Polish document. Soon after my success, Ignac obtained his labor card in a similar fashion.

But although possession of a labor card was necessary, it was not sufficient. For full safety on the outside, one needed also the all-important *Kennkarte*, the one with a photo and fingerprints; the one with the Nazi stamp showing an eagle and swastika; the one that required a baptismal certificate. But this Polish I.D. card was the most difficult to obtain; thus, we had to put it off for a later date.

While still in the camp, on the chance that somehow I might obtain this card, I did try to get a picture for it. To begin with, our Polish boss, the chief electrician, had to agree to smuggle a camera into the plant. Next, I had to find a linen cloth to provide the white background mandatory for all document pictures. Finally, I had to smuggle into the factory a dress jacket, a dress shirt and a tie, obviously not standard work attire. I managed to sneak in this clothing by carrying it inside specially selected baggie pants, tied with a shoelace at the bottom of each pant leg; in the meantime, the linen cloth was temporarily "relocated" from the factory's supply room to the electricians' room. My boss also had to develop the photo. The riskiest part of this task was involving the Pole;

his discretion was of paramount importance because he knew quite well why I wanted the photo. It is understandable that I had risked in asking him for help with the photo; my entire undertaking was risky. But why was he willing to take chances? Of course, I do not know but I do believe that deep down people had compassion and, when confronted with an opportunity to help, more often than not, they did.

In addition to the labor card, we needed a special certificate specifying permission for travel, since we expected to use these certificates away from the place of work. Moreover, we needed blank certificates for future use, in case we needed to alter our names or change travel dates. The solution to this problem lay in producing many copies. We even figured that if we could produce enough such blank forms, we might be able to find buyers for them. Thus, the “great printing plan” was born.

Ignac and I immediately started the planning for our printing enterprise: we prepared a long and ambitious list of what we needed and went to work on it. The task to obtain these items was, in and of itself, considerably harder than we had imagined. But our mindset, our determination—and our youthful naiveté—prevented us from realizing the difficulties ahead and kept us going. These difficulties included obtaining a *Tischlerei* stamp with a swastika and, standing upon it, an eagle with widely spread wings; a sample format of a *Tischlerei* certificate; a typewriter and the right kind of typing paper; and last but not least, someone who knew how to type. Above all, we needed ingenuity and luck.

Our resources were exceptionally limited. Some were practically non-existent, considering our circumstances. The stamp had to come from the office of the general manager of the factory, Mr. Kramer. The typewriter had to come from the Jewish Order police station, as theirs was the only typewriter in the camp. Finding a typist was less of

a problem, except that it meant involving other people, which was risky. Any activity designed to promote an escape from the camp, or aiding and abetting such activity, was punishable by death. But, at that time, we did not even consider the possibility of being caught, or how severe the consequences might be and the question of risk came up only when we tried to solicit help from others. Friends and even relatives were often reluctant to participate in what appeared to be—and was—a suspicious conspiracy.

We started with the stamp. As electricians, we could roam the plant and gain access to any office on the pretext that we had to repair or check an electrical problem. The cleaning women, who had master keys, knew us well and were routinely ready to open any doors for us. We took advantage of that fact and, within the next few days, we were in and out of Mr. Kramer's office several times, in order to ascertain the time of minimal activity in and around the office, as well as to determine the place where Mr. Kramer kept his stamps.

One afternoon, with Ignac on the lookout, I entered the office, checked the electrical outlets, tested the light bulbs, examined the switches, and then quietly proceeded to examine the desk drawers. Within minutes, I found the right drawer and there, the coveted *Tischlerei* stamp. A moment later, the stamp was in my possession and I was out of the office. From that moment, the stamp became our most precious asset.

Obtaining the typewriter presented a different challenge. The police station was not exactly in the typewriter rental business. We had to find a credible excuse to get it out of the hands of the Jewish police and into ours. We had learned, in a roundabout way, that the typewriter at the station did not work very well. One day, at the station, we found my cousin, Felek Neumark, who was one of the policemen, and informed him that

we knew how to fix typewriters and offered to repair theirs for free. The other policemen present were suspicious of our offer to fix the typewriter, but the machine was indeed not working well and our price was right, so they agreed. In no time, the typewriter was in our hands.

Ignac's roommate Rys agreed to do the typing. The paper, the format and the text were also ready by now. While Rys typed, Ignac and a couple of other friends and I sang loudly to drown out the clatter of the typewriter's keys. We produced over a dozen blank certificates, stamped them and, after some practice, placed the forged signatures on them: Mr. J. Kramer.

At the end of the typing session a small problem arose. We tried to mend the typewriter, as we had promised, but instead, the typewriter state of disrepair increased. We could not even properly reassemble it much less repair it. When we finally brought it back to the station, the policemen on duty examined the machine, told us that we were incompetent, that we had lied to them, that we were impostors, and kicked us out.

Unfortunately, they were right on all three counts. On the positive side, however, our task to produce a forged *Tischlerei* certificate was accomplished.

Chapter 5: PLOTTING ESCAPE

The most critical problem for an escapee from any camp or ghetto was finding lodging on the Polish side—a place to spend the first one or two nights after the escape and then, more permanent accommodations. Some individuals, and even families, did survive the war in hideouts without ever acquiring false papers; but chances for survival for those with papers but no lodging, was extremely low and hazardous. The police curfew covered all of occupied Poland and was strictly enforced; wandering at night or hiding in public places like parks or railroad stations was extremely dangerous, even punishable by death. Poles who knowingly provided lodging to an escapee were similarly punished. This particularly applied to newly arrived escapees who were unaware of possible help available from some underground organizations. Thus, finding a contact with a safe lodging outside the ghetto became our first priority and most important challenge.

Since Ignac's situation and mine were different and because it was safer to move as individuals, we had agreed to plan parallel, but separate, flight arrangements. For the first few days, I tried to find a hiding place somewhere in Tomaszow while Ignac planned to leave his hometown immediately.

For my final destination I chose Warsaw. As the capital of Poland with a population of approximately a million, Warsaw was by far the best city suited for living incognito. It was cosmopolitan and the center for various underground organizations. It was also a major railroad junction and so there were always many travelers, including foreigners, smugglers, and transients. Many newcomers arrived daily in the city unnoticed. I hoped to be one of them.

But I had another reason for choosing Warsaw. My Aunt Marysia was living there. She had sent me a short message a few weeks earlier with the name and address of a friend of hers in Tomaszow, who, in turn, had contact names for me in Warsaw. She had not written her own address on the note, in case the communication fell into the hands of the Germans. How her message got to me I do not know; I found it on my bed one evening when I got home from work. Most likely, it was delivered by one of the Jewish policemen who periodically ventured outside the ghetto on official business.

In Tomaszow, I was hoping to hide, after my escape, with the Szokalski family. Since my Aunt Rena had entrusted Mrs. Szokalska with some personal articles before her deportation, I was hopeful that she would be trustworthy enough for me to confide in her my plans and seek her help. Besides, I did not have many other choices. The Szokalski family was part of the *Volksdeutsche*. This group enjoyed many privileges and material advantages under the Germans, including the take-over of Jewish businesses, but, as the war progressed, they were made to pay their dues. They were forced to send their husbands and sons off to the front to fight for the “Fatherland” where many of them died. They were also shunned, often hated by their former Polish friends and neighbors and, after the war, many were branded as traitors to their native land and punished.

I sent Mrs. Szokalska a note introducing myself and asking her if she would help me in my escape plan. More specifically, I wanted to know if she would allow me to hide on her premises, at least for a few days. To deliver the note I used another *Volkdeutscher* who worked in the *Tischlerei* factory. He was a Slazak,³ a short, wiry man in his sixties who wore the green uniform of the Org.TODT. He did favors for me for a small

³ This was the Polish name for someone from the Slesien region, spanning before the war over both, Polish and German territory.

compensation, a few zlotys, but I always had the feeling that he was also doing it out of sympathy for the Jewish plight. No one would take the risk of being sent to the front, if caught, for a miserly few zlotys.

I waited anxiously for Mrs. Szokalska's answer, fearful of the danger of revealing my plans for escape to a stranger. My anxiety increased when I didn't hear from her after a few days. I sent Slazak to Mrs. Szokalska with another note and, to my relief, this time he returned with a positive response.

Words cannot express how significant and crucial this affirmative response was. In different ways, it was significant to both of us. Having a place to stay for the first few nights had become the major factor in my decision to escape. As for Mrs. Szokalska, she had courageously put herself and her family at risk by offering to help me. Polish (or other Christian) individuals, and even entire families, were known to have paid with their lives for hiding Jews. One had to have lived during those years of German occupation, with its strict barbaric laws and draconian reprisals, to fully appreciate the bravery and kindness that her decision represented. I have long since wondered what motivated her to take such a dangerous action, particularly in view of the fact that I was a stranger, the nephew of an acquaintance, someone she had never met.

In the meantime, Ignac was making plans with his older brother, Heniek, who was also in the labor camp. As they were native to Tomaszow and their wealthy parents had been well known before the war, they had Polish friends in town who were willing to help them and who, presumably, had already procured Polish ID cards for them.

Shortly before my final move, another fellow inmate, Ludwik, who was also toying with the idea of escape, asked me, "How do you overcome the fear of being

caught and killed? How does one find the courage to escape?” Remembering Yitzhak’s words at our AKIBA meetings, I replied, “The danger of dying inside the camp is far greater than being killed on the outside. It takes greater courage to stay than to leave.” I believe that this perception—or fear—of what the future held for us, was the motivating factor that drove me so hard and so uncompromisingly toward action, toward escape.

The only question that still remained open was when to escape.

Chapter 6: TOMORROW WILL BE TOO LATE...

I now had several elements of my escape plan in place. I had the promise of a hiding place from Mrs. Szokalska, a labor card in the name of Alfons Machowiak, and the forged *Tischlerei* certificate stating that I was on vacation. But I had one additional trump card: an address in Warsaw where I could safely stay the first few nights, the critical *pied-a-terre*. This address was held for me by a Polish friend of my Aunt Marysia who lived on the outskirts of Tomaszow.

I also decided that I would make my escape from the premises of the factory rather than from the camp, as the camp was surrounded by barbed wire and heavily guarded by Ukrainian SS men. The factory, on the other hand, had a six-foot high wooden fence and was only guarded by a couple of *Wehrmacht* soldiers, each on the opposite side of the complex. I still had to choose the exact location for the jump and the optimum time; a time when the guards would be furthest away and most distracted.

Just as my plans were about complete, my partner Ignac began to hesitate and his plans began to crumble. He now had a girlfriend, Tetka, a pretty sixteen-year-old. He was worried about leaving her behind, yet also concerned about taking on the responsibility for another person when his own fate was so uncertain. I wondered, too, if Ignac might have worried about what would be regarded as his noticeable Jewish features. He had short, dark, curly hair, full lips, a sallow complexion, and a somewhat large nose. He spoke excellent Polish, but, unfortunately, it was first impressions that counted, and in our situation there was rarely a chance for a second impression. On the positive side, both he and Tetka had the all-important Polish ID cards, the *Kennkarten*. Ignac had also a

promise from a Polish friend, Mr. Zasepa, that when the need arose, he would come and take both of them to a partisan group in the nearby forest.

Up until now Ignac had been my co-conspirator and co-collaborator, but while we had worked closely together on our general plans, we had prepared our actual escapes separately. Now, in view of these new circumstances, we considered whether both of us or even all three of us should run away together. But how could all of us show up at Mrs. Szokalska's doorstep when she had promised to help only me? Each extra person added almost an additional 100 percent risk of being discovered. Just moving around as a twosome or as a group would make us more conspicuous and put everybody in danger. Any misstep by any one of us would immediately cast a shadow of suspicion on the others. And where would we go if Mrs. Szokalska refused to take all three of us in? This concern, consciously and subconsciously, weighed heavily on all of us. Still, Ignac and Tetka abandoned their own plans and decided to join me and, despite my misgivings, I agreed to the new plan.

As determined and prepared as I was I kept postponing the final decision, the final time of the escape, the exact day and hour. Like Ignac, deep down I was afraid of the unknown, the world on the other side of the camp. Just like many others who thought about escaping and could have escaped but never took that final step, I was afraid of the "outside" world and of an uncertain future. After all, I was depending on crucial help from people who were strangers. I had money to last me a few days, maybe a few weeks, and then what?

It was because of these fears that I kept delaying the time when I would trade the familiar miserable life, for the uncertain and the unknown. It was a hard decision. In the

camp I had a bed; I was fed poorly but regularly and had the comfort of being among other Jews, people I knew and trusted. I had never met Mrs. Szokalska, or the lady in Tomaszow with the addresses, or any of the other people in Warsaw with whom I was to either lodge or work. My aunt Marysia was the only familiar name and, even then, I did not even have an address for her.

Life in the camp was rapidly deteriorating and conditions became harsher. We existed on a little black bread, artificial coffee, and a watery soup filled with potato peels handed out twice a day. We had barely enough calories to survive and, yet, the work was getting harder and the work-hours longer.

Acts of terror occurred more often. One of the tactics used by the Germans designed to instill fear and despair into the psyches of both the community leaders and the population at large, was the sudden change of the *Judenrat* leadership. One day, a Red Cross ambulance arrived at the camp and took away the head of the *Judenrat*, Mr. Bernstein, his wife, and their small son. Bernstein and his family had been our neighbors when we first moved into the ghetto. He was a lawyer from Lodz and had given me my first English lessons; the lessons had taken place in the evenings in his home, and, there, I came to know his wife and son as well. They were told that they were being allowed passage abroad, in an exchange for German prisoners. Instead, they were taken to the cemetery and shot. We realized their tragic fate only after the ambulance that had taken them away returned empty half an hour later, exactly the time needed for the fifteen minute trip from the camp to the Jewish cemetery and back again.

There were other forms of terror, including what came to be known as “Actions.” During one such “Action,” called “Purim Action” because it occurred close to the Purim holidays, twenty-one inmates were taken to the Jewish cemetery and killed. Another time, a young mother was discovered hiding her three-year-old daughter. As children were not allowed in the camp, both she and the little girl were taken away, never to be heard from again. Another woman was caught having a romance with a German supervisor: she was given thirty floggings on her bare buttocks, in public, at the camp's roll call in the square.

One day, early in the spring of 1943, there was a roll call for the camp population for the purpose of collecting whatever assets remained in our possession. Large baskets were placed on several tables. The SS, who paraded up and down with a retinue of vicious-looking dogs, ordered us under threat of death to place any pieces of gold, silver, or anything of value still in our hands, inside the baskets. The sight of the SS men shouting orders in a loud, staccato German, accompanied by the dogs barking loudly and straining at their leash, sent a shudder through my body as we assembled to hear the new orders. I waited, standing next to a tall, red-haired boy, no more than eighteen-years-old. Suddenly, with a simple “*Du!*” (You!), a member of the SS pointed in our direction. My mind panicked as I tried to comprehend if he was directing his command at me until the SS man roughly grabbed the boy next to me and pushed him to the front of the group. Four others were randomly chosen in the same way and lined up. Without any further delay, one after the other, the SS man shot them in the back of the head with a revolver. The red-headed boy fell right at his feet. There was tense silence and I noticed my hands

were shaking like a leaf; all I could think was how easily that could have been me. It was the first time in my life that I had witnessed killing at such a close range.

We immediately deposited everything we had inside the baskets, including money, watches, and other valuables. Even fountain pens had to be deposited if they had a gold nib.

In the afternoon there was a second appeal. This time the SS ordered us to deposit all valuables hidden at home. Motivated by an indescribable, uncontrollable fear, I went to my room and dug out from beneath the floorboards a pair of silver candlesticks I had found in one of the abandoned houses and hidden so that no one would find them. Now, with the terrible images of the morning's executions and the red-headed boy in my mind, I duly delivered them to the SS. I kept only my father's gold watch.

In the third week of April, 1943, we were kept away from work for three full days. The Warsaw Ghetto uprising had started and the Germans worried that the rebellion might spread to other ghettos and camps. The Ukrainian guard contingent was increased and put on high alert.

While rumors accompanied our lives throughout the war, they intensified in May. Each day there was a new one, each worse than the one before. It was unclear where or with whom they originated but they kept us in a state of constant fear. The latest and worst rumor was that now we, in the labor camp, would be “resettled”—a word that sent shivers down our spines.

On the morning of May 28, I ran into Mr. Kramer, the head of the Org. TODT *Tischlerei* near his office. Just like many times before, we engaged in conversation. Usually our chats were short and superficial but now I noticed a worried look on his face and seriousness in his voice; he appeared to be in a state of discomfort. After a few pleasantries, I asked him point blank what was going to happen to us. He was evasive at first but then, after a brief pause, he lowered his voice and said: “*Mein Sohn, mach weg wenn du kannst. Morgen wird es zu spaet sein...*” (“My son, flee if you can. Tomorrow will be too late....”). The Tomaszow labor camp was about to be liquidated and the inmates deported.

The gnawing question of when to escape was answered in that moment. It was the time when my life took a momentous and an unpredictable turn.

I immediately shared this news with Ignac, who in turn passed it on to his brother, Heniek, his girlfriend Tetka, and a few relatives and friends. That evening our final preparations started. We selected clothing and figured out how to carry money and a few valuables. By now my own valuables were reduced to two items: my father’s gold watch with three gold covers and several blank certificate forms, complete with a swastika stamp and signed by “Mr. J. Kramer.” They had to be hidden in a secure place, somewhere on my person. Ignac and I received three hundred zlotys each for two of our factory “certificates,” which we had sold to two fellow inmates, Felek Mak and Natan Neuman.⁴ I decided to entrust the stamp, some additional items of clothing, and a few photographs that I did not intend to take with me, to Mrs. Szewczykowa, a Polish woman I had known for the last couple of years. We had worked together at the Org. TODT on

⁴ Felek successfully escaped using this certificate.

Polna Street and then at the factory and, on a number of occasions, she had told me, “If ever I can be of help...”

Meanwhile, there were good-byes to say to people close to me; I pretended to be casual about it but I knew that, most likely, these were final good-byes. I kept my plans a secret from everyone except my cousin Rysia, with whom I had supper that night.

The next morning, while marching to the factory, Jerzyk, a casual friend who was usually cheerful and easygoing, turned to me and said, “Zenek, we have not even begun to live and we are already facing the end of our lives.” There was a terrible sadness in his eyes as he sensed what was about to happen to most of us. I cast my eyes down, anxious not to reveal my plans, as I knew doing so would be of no use to him and risky for me. I never heard from or about him again.

When we arrived at the factory, Ignac informed me that he had decided he would not escape without Tetka. But Tetka worked in another plant, and if we were to escape together, somehow she had to be brought to our factory. We approached Slazak, the *Volksdeutscher* employee who had previously carried notes between Mrs. Szokalska and me, and through whom we occasionally traded personal merchandise for food. We offered him a hundred zloty banknote (about \$5) to bring Tetka from her plant to ours. He agreed and, with Ignac, marched back to Tetka’s camp.

An hour later Tetka was with us but, still, she and Ignac could not decide to make their move. The burden of the unknown was too much to face for both of them, two young people who, before all this, had never known anything but the most sheltered, comfortable, and secure lives. Determined to get started on my plan, I told Ignac, “I cannot wait much longer. I’m ready to go.”

At three o'clock, Ignac and I shook hands, I gave Tetka a kiss on her cheek, wished both of them good luck, and then, with my false papers in the inside pocket of my jacket, my father's gold watch safely secured to my thigh with a bandage, and a change of clothes in a small leather briefcase, I headed toward the fence alone. I was about to face the most defining moment of my life.

On the inside of the six-foot-high wooden fence that surrounded the factory were several stacks of lumber and the factory's main complex. Further up the road, about one to two miles, was the camp representing a wretched life and a doomed future. On the other side there was the Wiecznosc Street, part of the residential portion of Tomaszow, and the street where Mrs. Szokalska lived. Beyond that fence was a dream world, a heaven of freedom, and a chance at survival. But possibly, too, it was my graveyard, my life's end.

Separating these two worlds was an elderly, lone German soldier in a gray uniform full of Nazi insignia, trudging slowly, his carbine hanging over his shoulder. It was not yet dark, but the sun had already set. The spring air was warm. I waited, hidden between the stacks of lumber. Two hours passed as I observed and calculated the soldier's every move, working out the perfect time to jump over the fence. I wanted to time it just right—when he was far enough away not to hear my jump, but at the same time, not yet ready to make the turn that would allow him to see me. I felt no hesitancy, even though my heart was pounding so hard that I was afraid someone might hear it and my stomach was knotted in fear. I knew very well that a miscalculation on my part or the sheer bad luck of a sudden and unexpected turn by the guard meant disaster. Freedom and a chance for life, on one hand, or a single bullet and death on the other.

After the sun had set, I sensed the time had come. Using the stack of lumber as a platform, I scrambled up the fence and jumped. Landing with my two feet firmly on the ground, I was now on the Polish side.

In my hand, I carried the leather briefcase with a change of clothes, some toiletries, and, in my pocket I had about eight hundred zlotys. I walked a few steps in the direction opposite that of the marching soldier, and then quickly crossed Wiecznosc Street. The side of the street closest to the fence was empty of pedestrians; on the other side, there were a few people but they paid no attention to me. Within minutes, my rapid pace never slackening, I reached the Szokalski house two blocks away.

I stood and looked at the number 37 on the house for a few seconds, just to be sure that I was at the right place. In front, there was a large yard full of trees and bushes; I hid behind one of the bushes closest to the house, closed my eyes, and waited. As I sat motionless on the ground, mentally and emotionally drained, one thought kept crossing my mind: What if nobody is home? What if Mrs. Szokalska has changed her mind? But there was no way to turn back the clock.

When darkness fell, I approached the door quietly and knocked. My heart was racing as I heard footsteps approaching. Mrs. Szokalska, a pretty middle-aged woman, opened the door, her daughter, Lucja, standing right behind her. I introduced myself in as calm a voice as possible.

“Good Evening Mrs. Szokalska. I am Zenon, Mrs. Rubinek’s nephew.”

Mrs. Szokalska showed no surprise at my appearance. She greeted me politely but did not say much more. Matter-of-factly, she directed me to the back of the house, to a garden shack where I was to stay, only commenting that food would be brought to me the

next morning. Then, as she was about to leave, she moved closer, leaned toward me, and whispered: “Don’t let my husband see you. He doesn’t know that you will be staying here.” I thanked her and turned to go inside the garden shack. I rolled up my winter parka for a pillow, lay down, and soon fell into an exhausted sleep. When I woke up the next morning, rather late, there was bread with marmalade and a glass of milk waiting for me. Some soup and vegetables were brought later in the day.

At about five o’clock the next morning, I was awoken by the sound of heavy footsteps getting closer and closer to my temporary abode. I peered through a crack in the wooden shack and saw that a man was approaching. I could feel the sweat on my brow and the palms of my hands as I watched him come nearer. I remembered that Mrs. Szokalska had warned me about her husband; now I prepared for the worst. As he reached the entrance of the shack, Mr. Szokalski opened the door slightly and, with an index finger touching his lips, he whispered, “Shh, Shh. My wife and my daughter think that I am deaf and can’t hear anything; that I don’t know about you. But I can hear enough. I know that you are here and I am glad. Here is some bread for you.”

Relief flooded my body.

Later, Mrs. Szokalska brought me news what had happened to the camp and its inmates during the “resettlement” action, and what was presently happening in the town.

“The camp has been liquidated,” she told me. “The population was taken to the railroad station by foot only yesterday afternoon, loaded into freight cars and taken to an undisclosed destination. The town is swarming with SS men and the police. The liquidation of the camp lasted three days and then the Germans left. No one knows where

the camp inmates were taken. There are rumors that two or three inmates tried to escape but that they were caught and shot.”

At the factory, my escape created a logistics problem that I hadn’t considered and that could have had dire consequences for me. As usual, before the workers were marched off back to the camp, there was a roll call and that day the count would have been short by one. Luckily, Tetka was still at our factory. With her long dark blond hair stuffed into a man’s hat, she took my place in the column, next to Ignac. Thus, the count for the return was the same as that on arrival in the morning.

In the days following my escape, most of the time I spent in a daze, completely empty of thoughts and emotions. The picture that I had formed of the camp and what had happened there during its last days, how the inmates were treated by the Nazis and their reaction to the deportation, was anything but clear—it was incomplete and incomprehensible, like images behind a thick cloud. Their fear, agony, and total defenselessness was beyond what I could imagine. As for me, the reality of my successful escape did not sink in, not then, and not for some time to come. In the meantime, I spent a lot of time either reading some old newspapers or just dozing off.

There was no discussion with Mrs. Szokalska about my plans, or how long I expected to stay with them and, remarkably, considering how unsafe this was to her and her family, she imposed no limits on my stay. My plan was to stay for only a few days but she did not know it; at first, it was not completely clear in my own mind when I should move on. Besides, I thought that the less the Szokalskis knew about my plans, the safer it would be for all of us. Also, at no time was there any mention of compensation for their aid, in any form or shape, now or in the future. Although I never knew their

exact motivation in helping me, one thing was certain—they were not helping me for material gain.

On the morning of the fifth day following my escape, I collected all my worldly belongings and started the next phase of my odyssey: the journey to Warsaw. I did not notify my benefactors about my departure. I like to think that it was for safety's sake, theirs and mine. It certainly was not out of lack of gratitude for what they had done for me.

My first stop was the house of my aunt's friend, a local Polish lady whose name I don't recall; she held the all-important contact names in Warsaw. I arrived there at about 5:30 in the morning. Even though I roused her out of her bed, she received me warmly and gave me two addresses. One address was for Janina, another friend of my Aunt Marysia, at whose apartment I could stay if necessary; in addition, Janina knew where and how to contact my aunt. The other address was the workplace of Kuba Rajzman, a fellow Tomaszowian and a casual acquaintance who had escaped early on. When I was ready to leave, my aunt's friend, her pale blue eyes watering, wished me good luck with a traditional Polish saying: *Idź z Bogiem* (God be with you). She was visibly moved, but I could not tell whether it was because my visit reminded her of the dramatic events happening in town over the past four days or whether she feared for my fate. Perhaps, it was because she had been awakened at such an ungodly hour.

With a flat peasant hat lowered over my face, I proceeded toward the railroad tracks, about two miles away. I made a sharp turn to the right and followed the tracks for another eleven miles, to the nearest railroad station in Jelen. I tried to avoid the Tomaszow railroad station in case of encountering the Nazi SS police or Gestapo.

The Jelen Station was smaller than Mrs. Szokalska's garden shack: one employee behind a cashier's window, two wooden benches, and a wastebasket. There was only one other traveler waiting, a middle-aged woman with a babushka on her head. We did not say much during our five-hour wait, but, from time to time, we exchanged stares: she, probably out of boredom and I, fearing that somehow she would realize that I was a Jew and an escapee. The probability of her recognizing me as a Jew—especially with the hat covering half of my face—was negligible, but my terror of being recognized was real and oppressive. It was a fear that was omnipresent and it remained with me throughout the years of the war. There is a proverb in Polish that best describes my self-consciousness: "*Na złodzieju czapka gore.*" It roughly translates into "a guilty person looks guilty," or literally, "a thief's hat glows." During the months and years ahead, I had to worry about the truth of this proverb many, many times.

The two-hour trip to Warsaw was uneventful; hardly a word was exchanged among the passengers. Some of the people in the compartment read, some looked at the scenery, but most just sat there, staring blankly into space. The people around me looked unusually strange to me, appearing well-fed and reasonably well-dressed. They had an air of contentment and a sense of security that I lacked. Their faces expressed an inner calm; their stares were clear and relaxed, quite in contrast to what I was accustomed to seeing on people's faces in the camp. Some were young, some old, men and women. Very likely many of them were smugglers, for in occupied Poland smuggling was a way to survive. If caught, these people would lose their merchandise, I thought to myself; if I were caught, I would lose my life.

My mind was a jumble. I thought about my parents and my sister in the Lodz Ghetto. I wondered what had happened to Ignac and the others I had left behind and whether I would ever see any of them again. I wondered what the future might hold for me, and how I would manage on my own. I thought about how I had felt alone in the ghetto when my aunts and cousin were deported; but now, here, outside the camp, I was more alone than ever before and very insecure. Never in my life had I been left totally to my own devices. I was homesick; more than anything I wanted to see my parents and my sister. My other senses were numb, so numb that even though I had nothing to eat or drink all day long, I never felt hungry or thirsty. However, some part of me also felt a deep satisfaction; I had a sense of having succeeded. I felt there was a chance that I might survive. I felt free. Maybe for a short time only, but free nonetheless.

Chapter 7: BETRAYAL

The train slowed down and rolled into the main station amidst an ever-increasing number of tracks. It was about seven o'clock in the evening and, although the sun had set, the air was still warm. I stepped down onto the platform and joined the huge number of people moving silently but rapidly towards the exit. Outside the station, masses of people scattered hurriedly in all directions. I glanced around me, concerned that I was being watched, worried that I might look conspicuous, carrying only a light briefcase and wearing a heavy jacket in June.

A passerby gave me directions to my destination: No. 37, Pius IX Street. About twenty minutes later I reached the address: a tall, gray, drab apartment building in a long row of similar buildings. The concierge looked at me with suspicion. Then he directed me to the seventh floor: "Take the elevator. When inside, close the door and push the button with the number seven." I later learned that in Warsaw all concierges were suspicious and that they all assumed, incorrectly in my case, that first-time visitors had never used an elevator. Minutes later, with a mixture of hope and trepidation, I knocked lightly on the door. Even though my aunt and Janina were friends and Janina's brother had once been an employee of a hotel that belonged to my relatives, I was apprehensive. The same questions that had plagued me outside the Szokalskas' house returned to torment me again. What if Janina wasn't home? What if she refused to take me in? Where would I go with the police curfew starting at nine o'clock, less than an hour from now?

My thoughts were interrupted when the door opened and an attractive woman, about thirty-five years old, stood before me. Hearing that I was Marysia's nephew,

Janina called out my name, opened the door wide and warmly welcomed me in. At once, she prepared hot soup, with bread and butter. Suddenly aware of my how long it had been since my last meal, I gulped it down in no time and then had a second helping and then a third. When I finished, Janina wanted to know all about my escape from the Tomaszow labor camp and about my trip to Warsaw. She was pleasant, kind, and hospitable and showed a genuine interest in my stories, asking for more and more details.

Janina's apartment was modest: a small bedroom, a kitchen that also served as a living and dining room, and a nook with a sloping ceiling above a narrow bed. There was also a washroom consisting of a toilet and a sink with cold running water. She invited me to stay in the apartment, indicating that I could sleep in the nook. As with the Szokalska family, there was no mention of any compensation or time limit for my stay. "In a few days I will arrange for a meeting with your Aunt Marysia; she sure will be happy to see you," she added.

Later that night, as I lay on the bed in the nook, gazing up at the sloping ceiling, I felt happy, relaxed, and very much at home. Any misgivings I may have had only hours earlier had disappeared. Now I felt completely safe and was overwhelmed by the friendliness of my hostess and the comforts of my new lodging: a clean bed with a pillow and a comforter; warm meals served on a table with a tablecloth, and a washroom with privacy. What a contrast to what I had had just a few days earlier and how lucky I considered myself now to be.

We ate three times a day. The food was nothing special—mostly soups, fried potatoes, and occasionally a piece of Polish sausage. The bread was dark and tasteless, but fresh, and the coffee was a liquid that was coffee-colored only, leaving the aroma and

taste to one's imagination. Nevertheless, to me, after the paltry rations in the camp, all this food tasted wonderful and I could not get enough of it.

For the next two days, I slept a lot, read the daily Polish newspaper, *Nowy Kurier Warszawski*—a mouthpiece of Nazi propaganda—and idly chatted the time away with Janina. I did not talk about my future plans because I did not have any; I did not talk about the past because I did not want to be reminded. But neither did Janina talk about her past or future. Our conversations were mostly about non-events and non-topics. She did not seem to have either a job or friends; even the neighbors did not visit. From my perspective, this was for the better, as she did not need to explain my being there. From time to time she left me alone to go shopping and run errands, but she always returned after a short while.

At the end of the second day, Janina notified me that the next morning she would have to leave very early but would be back around 9 a.m. “Please, just sleep in,” she told me. I did not think much about it that evening or the next morning when I got up, washed, dressed, had some breakfast, and buried myself in the newspaper. Around nine o'clock, Janina returned as she had promised.

A few minutes later there was a sharp knock on the door. In quick succession, there was another, louder one, then still another, followed by a harsh order, in German: “Open up! Police! Open up!”

Janina and I both froze. We looked at each other but could not utter a word. I felt the blood drain from my face as Janina opened the door and two men stormed in. Both were tall; one was a civilian who spoke German and Polish, the other was a German gendarme from the *Schutzpolizei* (security police) who spoke only German. The Nazi

insignia on his uniform stood out menacingly; he looked particularly ferocious with his helmet, a metal tag with a police logo hanging on a chain from his neck, and a large holstered revolver hanging on his belt. They made straight for me. “Documents! Who are you? What are you doing here? You are a Jew!” the civilian shouted in Polish.

Trying to keep my voice steady, I told him my name and said that I was visiting a friend. I denied being a Jew. At the last answer, he hit me across the face and for a moment I lost my balance. After I had pulled myself together, he hit me again and shouted, “You ARE a Jew!” This time I tasted blood in my mouth.

The civilian told me to take my clothes off, but when I got down to my shorts, he suddenly motioned to me not to undress further. He had noticed the bandage on my left thigh. Immediately, he ordered me to undo it, revealing my father’s gold watch. The gendarme took it into his hands, admired the carved design on its cover for a moment, and then put it into his pocket. He then indicated to the little flat bag on my back, hanging on a string around my neck. The gendarme pulled it off by breaking the thin string. Inside they found the blank certificate forms from the factory in Tomaszow, stamped with the swastika and carrying the signature of “Mr. J. Kramer, manager of *Tischlerei*, Org. TODT.” It was obvious that the blanks were forgeries and that I was a fugitive. This bag, too, they put into their pockets.

They slapped my face a few times more. I was bleeding now from my nose and lips. From this point on I did not bother to make any more denials. After they exchanged a few sentences in German, the happiness that I had felt over the past few days was crushed as they informed me that I was to be taken to Gestapo headquarters in Aleje Szucha, a place notorious for its torture chambers and for the fact that many who were

taken there never came out alive. “We would have to get our car first,” they added. “Do not move. Wait here,” they ordered. “We will be back in an hour to collect you.” They took the keys to the apartment and my winter jacket and left, locking the door from the outside.

During this entire ordeal I did not see or hear from Janina, but now I saw her sitting at the kitchen table, crying and lamenting my fate, her hands covering her face.

“How could this have happened? Who were they? How did they find out about you?” she asked, her voice frightened and upset and tears running down her face.

Once she had calmed down, Janina helped me clean the blood from my face and the floor while I dressed quickly. My thoughts were racing and it took me no more than a few minutes to reach a decision: I would commit suicide by jumping from the window. Since we were on the seventh floor, this would not be difficult, if only I could summon up the courage. An image of a crumpled body lying in a pool of blood splattered across the courtyard pavement flashed before my eyes. But then I thought of the torture chambers of Aleje Szucha. Why be tortured and then die? I preferred to jump.

Pushing a chair towards the window, I climbed onto it and then onto the windowsill. Janina, realizing what I planned to do, ran to me, grabbing me with both hands and shrieking at the top of her lungs, “NO, NO, NO! Don’t do it, please don’t do it.” She was hysterical again, shouting, and crying in turns. If she was saying anything else, I could not make out what it was. I felt her hands grab my pant legs, holding on with strength surprising for such a small, slim woman. She pulled me to the floor. There followed a few awkward moments and then she gradually calmed herself, breaking my dazed silence with an occasional “Oh, my God, Oh, my God.”

Janina said she had a plan for me; she knew how to open the locked door so that I could escape. I could stay with her brother Zygmunt, the one who worked in my relatives' hotel before the war. She hastily scribbled his address and directions on a piece of paper and pushed it into my hand. I did not say anything. I was stunned and confused. I had known that my escape and life on the run were risky and that the end could come at any time. But I did not expect it so soon.

Meanwhile, Janina had opened the door and was rushing me to get going.

"They may arrive in less than an hour. You must hurry!" she warned me.

My mind was blank. I could think of nothing else I could do, so I followed her plan. I put my regular jacket on, stuffed my few possessions into the briefcase, and with a short "thank you," and "goodbye," I left. Luckily, the two Germans had not noticed my regular jacket hanging in the other room, where I kept the labor card in the name of Machowiak and my money.

As I passed the concierge's window on the way out, he looked at me with even greater suspicion than he had when I had first come in. Once on the street, I merged into the crowd moving towards the nearest tram stop. There, still in a daze, I climbed into the first tram that arrived, not even knowing if it was the right one. The experience had shattered my barely acquired sense of freedom and hope. Briefly, I thought of what might happen to Janina when the Germans returned to find me gone—everyone knew that Poles who helped Jews escape or hid them in their homes were severely punished. But I was too distraught to think rationally. All I could do was wonder if I would find a safe hideout at Zygmunt's. Only after I had arrived at the address, did I realize how lucky I was to be alive. I had won, at least for now, a new lease on life.

Zygmunt, his wife, and a young niece who was staying with them, received me just as warmly as Janina had, three days earlier. I had met Zygmunt a couple of times at the beginning of the war, when he would carry packages or letters between family members in Tomaszow and Warsaw. He was tall and heavysset, his wife petite and pretty. Both were about forty-years-old.

Within minutes, Zygmunt sent his niece to the store to buy a bottle of vodka so we could properly celebrate my success in escaping from the camp, and my presence now in Warsaw, among friends.

“What a great escape story! Congratulations!” Zygmunt said, toasting me with a glass of vodka. “One more drink for good luck in the future!” We had some more drinks. They could not have been happier for me and, as with Janina, I felt at home, among friends. Gulping down one glass of vodka after another—always supplementing each gulp with a snack (*zakaska*) in the Polish tradition—my escape from the Gestapo at Janina’s apartment slowly unraveled. Zygmunt and his wife were completely surprised. “How could this have happened?” he asked. “Was it the concierge who denounced you? Did someone follow you from the railroad station?” Both were inquisitive about what had happened but they did not seem to be at all concerned about Janina’s fate, even though she could have been in serious trouble as a consequence of helping me. And, since they did not worry about Janina, neither did I.

“Let’s be positive!” Zygmunt said, toasting me with another drink. “You are here and you are well. You can stay here until you find better accommodations and on Sunday you’ll meet with your Aunt Marysia. We know how to contact her.”

For the next two days, our topics of conversation centered on Aunt Marysia, my good fortune of being alive, and news reports of German defeats in Russia. Conspicuously absent from our conversations was any mention of Janina.

I spent two nights with Zygmunt and his family. The place was extremely uncomfortable. It was even smaller than Janina's place and there were four of us. There was only one bed, so the niece and I slept on mats on the floor. In order to do that, the dining table had to be moved into a corner.

In the early afternoon of the second day, I went out, telling my hosts that I wanted to look for a job. Instead, I went to look up Kuba Rajzman, the man whose address I had received from the lady in Tomaszow. I found Kuba without any difficulty; he was working in a dry-cleaning store not far from Zygmunt's apartment. We went for a walk and I told him about my close encounter with the Gestapo. But, unlike Zygmunt and his wife, Kuba was not surprised. "It's the first, but not the last one. We all have experienced similar situations," he said. Right away, he suspected that the men behind my interrogators were not Germans but Polish blackmailers (*szmalcownicy*) working in cahoots with uniformed German policemen on the take.

Kuba urged me, as a precautionary measure, to leave Zygmunt's home as soon as possible, but independently, I had already decided not to return. He promised to help me find a new lodging, telling me to visit him the next day. In the meanwhile, I was to find some lodging to cover the situation. Even though in Tomaszow we were only acquaintances—he was a few years older than I and had his own circle of friends—Kuba was extremely supportive and helpful and I was grateful for his friendly support, especially as I had no one else to turn to.

Finding a place to stay in wartime Warsaw was difficult for all newcomers; it was more so for fugitives like me. Nonetheless, I decided to leave Zygmunt's at the earliest opportunity, even before I found a new lodging. Somehow, after my talk with Kuba, it did not feel right or even safe to stay there. So that same afternoon, while still leaving my briefcase with my belongings there, I told them that I would not be coming back for the night.

After leaving Zygmunt's, I was homeless. With no place to sleep, wash, or relieve myself, each day and night presented challenges for which I was totally unprepared. I was also unaware of how dangerous it was to wander around the city all day, with no job, home address, or proper documentation. It was especially dangerous to be without an ID card.

The first evening I found myself in the center of the Old Town, looking for any accommodation available—but I soon found out that either there were no rooms for rent or, if there were, I could not afford them. I asked passersby but they ignored me or shrugged their shoulders to say they did not know of any. The evening got darker and darker, the curfew hour was rapidly approaching, and I still had no place for the night. I began to panic as the streets emptied.

I had reached an area close to the Vistula River—a rather seedy district—when someone directed me to a small, shabby looking house. Since we were minutes away from the curfew hour, I had no other choice but to go in. The entrance to the house opened directly from the alley. The facility consisted of one very big room, half in

darkness, with six or seven beds equipped with straw mattresses. People already occupied most of the beds, but one was still empty.

As I entered, a short fat woman took my forty-zloty note (less than a dollar) and showed me to my bed. “Are you alone?” she asked in surprise, but then just waved her hand and walked away. In the morning, when daylight’s rays illuminated the room, I realized that I had spent the night in a bordello. During the day the beds were rented for much less money, but only by the hour.

That morning, with nothing to do until my meeting with Kuba, I decided to wile away some time in Saski Park. As I sat on a park bench reading a newspaper, two German gendarmes walked by. I continued reading as they passed me. Then, after a minute, I raised my head to make sure that they had gone. They had not. They were standing some fifty yards away, watching me. When they saw me raise my head, they immediately started moving in my direction.

“Documents,” the gendarmes ordered, in stern voices, as they approached. Calmly, I pulled out my labor card. They studied it carefully.

“What are you doing in Warsaw if you work in Tomaszow?” one asked.

Keeping my composure, I pulled the certificate from my wallet, also duly stamped with a swastika. It stated clearly that I was on vacation and it was signed by the head of the *Tischlerei*, Mr. J. Kramer. They gave me back my documents and left. This time, I did not check to see if or where they went, nor did I raise my head again. Furtively looking back, like glancing quickly to the sides, was a sure giveaway. That was how the hunted and the fearful acted, those who had something to hide. Such movements were well known to the German police and the Polish blackmailers, which is why the gendarmes

came back to check my papers. Without question, the documents that Ignac and I had created so painstakingly in the camp were, literally, my lifesavers.

The next day, about noon, I left the same park to make my daily visit to Kuba. As I waited at the station for my tram, a young man in the uniform of a Polish railroad worker stepped down from another tram. I recognized him at once—he was Friedel Goldberg, now Fryderyk Gorniak, another Tomaszovian who had escaped early on.

I let him distance himself a bit and then caught up to him: he also recognized me. At first he was friendly, but when I told him that I desperately needed help—a place to sleep, a job—his expression, his whole demeanor, changed.

“You must leave me alone,” he declared, waving me away. “I cannot help you, and besides, it is not safe to be seen together. Do not follow me,” he added almost threateningly. I was bitterly disappointed. For hours his words of rejection reverberated in my ears as I agonized over how a fellow escapee could be unwilling to help.

A few weeks later an obituary note in the daily *Kurier* announced that a certain Fryderyk Gorniak had died while jumping off a diving board in a swimming pool. The accident occurred at a popular sports club near the Vistula River. Next time when I saw Kuba he confirmed that indeed, it was “our” Fryderyk who died.

On the fourth day of my homelessness Kuba gave me an address: Powisle, Solec Street 46, apartment 49. This was also in a quarter near the Vistula River, not far from the bordello where I had stayed, but in a slightly—only slightly—better neighborhood. What was available for rent was not a room, but a corner of a room. The room, though, was relatively spacious and offered a nice bed with a comforter, white

linen, and a colorful bed cover; I took it without hesitation, delighted by the thought of my own bed with two soft pillows, a comforter, and a mattress.

That evening, Mr. and Mrs. Spoczynski, the couple renting the corner, offered me hot soup with bread for dinner and tea, made of dry apple peels, with cookies afterward. Afterwards, Mr. Spoczynski showed me a watch that he had received several years before the war, for fifty years of service to his company. He and his wife must have been well over eighty, both of them kind and charming. Neither one could hear or see very well but that did not bother me. In fact, as it turned out, it had its positive aspects. How could they recognize that some of my visitors, or I, were Jewish if they could not see or hear well?

The next morning, Saturday, I notified Kuba that with his help I had succeeded in finding a place to stay. Next, I went to retrieve my briefcase from Zygmunt. I thanked him and his wife for their hospitality and told them that I would keep in touch. Then, with the daily newspaper under my arm, I went off to Saski Park. It was a sunny day and, as on every Saturday, the park was full of people, of all ages and from all walks of life. I waited in anticipation for the following day, when I would finally be reunited with my Aunt Marysia, whom I had not seen for almost four years.

Chapter 8: AUNT MARYSIA

The day before our meeting I was filled with great eagerness and anxiety. I knew very little about my aunt's life. I was not even sure if she was in hiding, or living in the open but under an assumed name. I also didn't know whether she was with her children, my cousins Hania and Irka. I wanted to hear what had happened to her but I was also impatient to tell her my story about what had happened to me at her friend's apartment two days after my arrival.

The next day, Sunday, I got up early, washed, smoothed out my rumpled clothing, the best I could, and set off for Krasinski Park, where we were to meet at eleven o'clock, next to the fountain. The day was bright and sunny. A light wind was blowing softly on the leaves that had fallen to the ground. The sight of so many people was extraordinary to me, all in their Sunday best, cheerful and animated. Some had just come from morning Mass, others were on a Sunday stroll. Most people were paired, man with woman, but also man with man and woman with woman, holding each other under the arm. Some were laughing, some more sober looking, but none showed an iota of worry. Children were running, playing, giggling, or pulling on their mother's skirts. It was a bittersweet sight for someone who, not too long ago, had many little cousins and neighbors, but who also had not seen any children for a year and a half. As I waited for my aunt, I was absorbed in watching the children play, looking at the birds dipping their beaks into the fountain and gulping sips of water, and the slowly falling leaves. The half-hour flew quickly by.

At exactly eleven o'clock, from the corner of my eye I spotted a well-dressed, middle-aged woman approaching the fountain. I wouldn't have recognized her, except that she was alone and looking left and right. We saw each other. I felt goose bumps all over my body. What a thrill it was to see her, to meet a flesh and blood close relative, after months of being alone. At last, I would be with a member of my family.

We made an effort to make the meeting appear casual so as not to attract attention: a simple handshake and a triple kiss on the cheeks, the Polish way. We blended into the moving crowd. People were walking slowly, keeping sufficient distances between them to assure privacy of their conversations.

Our problem was where to start and, then, how to maintain an outward calm and joviality while burning inside with impatience and anxiety. I had, by now, learned little behavioral tricks of pretending, never thought of before, yet so critical now. They soon became instinctive and completely natural.

After an initial exchange of the mundane, I realized that the smile on her face hid a terrible tragedy: Marysia's two little girls, eleven-year-old Hania and nine-year-old Irka, were gone. Not much was said about it in Krasinski Park or in the months and years that followed. With time, however, and indirectly from friends, I learned of the horror of her loss. Henryk, Marysia's husband, was one of my uncles who had escaped into Russia, along with Julian and Max. Marysia remained in Warsaw, ending up in the Warsaw Ghetto with her two little daughters and her sister-in-law Mania, Max's wife. While in the Warsaw Ghetto, Marysia had learned on the grapevine that only the families of those whose head of the household was employed by a German company would be exempted from deportation. With the greatest difficulty and a substantial payoff, she secured such a

job. But one day, when she returned home, the girls were gone. Desperate, she ran first to the police station, then to the *Judenrat*, and finally to the *Umschlagsplatz*, the infamous point of departure for deportations. But to no avail. No effort could have brought them back. After the loss of the girls, both Marysia and Mania escaped into the Aryan side in Warsaw, hiding among the Polish population. A few weeks later, however, after she had been robbed several times by blackmailers and forced to search repeatedly for a new “safe lodging”, Mania returned to the ghetto. She was unable to take the stress of being a hunted person, of hiding, of being someone else. She was never heard from again.

It will remain an eternal mystery how much misfortune a human being can suffer. We had a common prayer in those days: Oh Lord, please do not afflict us with as much pain and sorrow, as we are able to endure.

Marysia and I walked in rhythm with the other Sunday strollers. Briefly, we touched on many subjects. Life in Warsaw, relatives, the general rules that governed the peculiar life on the Aryan side. Marysia’s own situation, as a “Gentile” with false identity papers, working in a bed and breakfast place for relatives of German officers stationed in Warsaw, appeared to be relatively safe and satisfactory.

Eagerly, I told her about my experiences of the last few days that almost ended my life. She was not surprised, as Zygmunt had already told her about it. But the surprise was all mine when Marysia told me who the real perpetrators of my mishap were: none other than Janina and Zygmunt! They and their gang of blackmailers!

I was shocked, unable to fully comprehend what I had just heard. I could not understand how my aunt’s friends, a former employee, recipients of many favors, could carry out such an egregious act. When I escaped from the camp I knew it was possible,

even probable, that I might be caught and killed by the Germans, that Polish Nazi collaborators might denounce me, that common thieves might rob me. What I was not prepared for was a betrayal by my aunt's old and trusted friends.

Next, we addressed a pressing and important matter—that of an ID card for me. Aunt Marysia knew of a man who worked in the Registrar's office where birth certificates were issued. All I needed was to submit my full name, my parents' full names, a date and place of birth and, a fifty-zloty bribe. A true certificate probably did not cost more than two or four zloty but that required a baptismal certificate from the priest.

I was in the Registrar's office early the next morning and within half an hour, I had the birth certificate in my pocket. The next steps were routine: with a passport-type picture and another ten zloty, I applied for an ID card under my newly chosen name of Zenon Matysiak. It took two to three weeks to get the card, and, so, until then, I remained Alfons Machowiak.

Marysia and I set up times and locations for regular meetings in addition to plans for contingencies, should unexpected problems arise. We described the approximate home location, without giving the exact address, and exchanged third-party telephone numbers, for emergencies. I gave Marysia Kuba's work number; she gave me that of a friend's office. We said goodbye, until the next Sunday, and parted.

My next challenge was finding a job. I had very little money left, and I had to buy food and pay my rent. Besides, being a young man of eighteen, hanging out on the streets of Warsaw, was certain to attract attention. There were almost daily "catchings" or "round-ups" (*lapanki*) during which the Germans would cordon off a three to four block area and arrest all young, and some not so young, men. They would all be taken to a

large and notorious prison, called Pawiak. These men became hostages for future German reprisals for acts of resistance committed by the Polish Underground.

Typically, for each act in which a German national died, at least one hundred blindfolded and handcuffed hostages would be taken out of the Pawiak prison, brought to the site of the skirmish, put against the wall and shot. The next morning the Nazis would plaster the walls of the city with proclamations announcing the names of those killed and warning others of similar punishment in the future. Within hours after the executions, the relatives of the Polish victims made the killing site a martyrs' shrine overflowing with pictures of the victims, crosses, candles, and flowers.

While I waited for my ID card, I returned to Tomaszow as Alfons Machowiak. I needed to retrieve some clothing I'd left with Mrs. Szewczykowa and hoped she might know something about what had happened to Ignac and the other inmates after the camp was liquidated. She was the only person in Tomaszow Ignac and I knew and trusted, and she would have been the one to hear from him.

My visit was short and very emotional. I was glad to see an old and dependable friend and she was happy to learn that my escape had been successful and that I was alive and safe. But she had no information about Ignac. Under the circumstances, all I could do was to leave my new name and address with her, and hope that Ignac, if he was still alive, might somehow get in touch. I never gave anyone else who knew my true identity any information concerning my assumed name or my address. That just was not done, for the safety of either party.

When Mrs. Szewczykowa and I said goodbye, I was very touched. This woman had worried about me as if I was her own child. She was concerned about my uncertain future in the big city, about whether or not I could survive living under false papers, and whether I would encounter good people to help and protect me. A deeply religious woman, she wept for me as placed her hands on my head in a gesture of blessing.

On that trip from Warsaw to Tomaszow I also experienced a one-in-a-million coincidence. At the junction station of Koluszki, where I was to transfer to another train, I ran into the *real* Alfons Machowiak, my fellow worker from the *Tischlerei* in Tomaszow and the true owner of the stolen labor card I was now carrying.

“Zenek, what are *you* doing here?” he exclaimed loudly from a distance as soon as he saw me. “Didn’t you go together with...” he stopped himself in mid-sentence as he approached me and we shook hands. I greeted him cordially but answered his few questions with a long string of my own questions: “Where are you going? Are you traveling alone? It’s good to see you, Alfons. How are things in the *Tischlerei*?” He looked baffled, not sure if seeing and hearing me was real. But I did not give him a chance to lessen his befuddlement or to ask me more questions. I excused myself with the explanation that nature was calling and ran to the public restroom nearby. I did not come out for a long time. By that time, his train has left and I never saw Alfons again.

This meeting was an unusual coincidence and could have had terrible consequences. On the Aryan side one was always worried about running into someone who knew you as a Jew; such an encounter could end up giving you away, intentionally or unintentionally. But I can hardly imagine a worse situation than running into someone who not only knew you as a Jew but whose identity and document you were carrying.

Chapter 9: WORKING AT WIFO

I had to find employment as an economic necessity and as a safety precaution. One morning, after reading in the *Nowy Kurier Warszawski* that a German *Baustelle* (a construction company) was looking for electricians, I went to Antoninow, just outside of Grochow, a suburb of Warsaw. The *Baustelle* was about two miles from Grochow's tram stop, an easy walk for an eighteen-year-old. At the *Baustelle*, they seemed to have been waiting for someone like me: I had a twenty-minute interview and was instantly hired.

What attracted me most about this job was that, besides a weekly paycheck, they gave their workers breakfast and lunch daily. I also liked the fact that they didn't ask me to prove my skills as an electrician; they did not request to see my training papers, test me, or ask for references. I would have failed on all counts. What made them want me was that I knew some German.

There was an immediate problem, however—my documentation. They required an ID card and mine was still in the works, completion date unknown. We agreed that I was to report to work as soon as I obtained my new card. In the interim, at my request, they gave me a short note stating that I was being considered for a position with their firm and sent me off. This was my first document with my new last name, Matysiak. It was written on the firm's stationary, stamped with the swastika, and carried the Nazi greeting "Heil Hitler." It was also the first Aryan document I'd owned that was neither stolen nor forged. The importance of this piece of paper cannot be overstated. In wartime Warsaw, obtaining a genuine German document was like winning a lottery. Moreover, this new note—except for my last name and place of birth—had nothing phony on it.

To support my new identity, I needed one more element: a “new” history. Where did I live before the war? Which school(s) did I attend? Was I born in Warsaw? How many sibling do I have? Where are my parents? What are they doing for a living? Why do I live alone? I had to be careful with the answers to these questions. First, I had to have my story down pat so as not to contradict myself. The story had to be the same every time I was queried. Then, I was best off to claim that although I was born in Warsaw, I really grew up with my grandfather, in a small town, far away, had a very small family, and so on.

On the day I picked up my new Polish ID card, the *Kennkarte*, I was ecstatic, beaming from ear to ear. I felt great satisfaction, a sense of a major accomplishment. For years, first in the ghetto and then in the camp, my friends and I had dreamt of owning this document. People were willing to pay exorbitant prices to buy it. AKIBA members risked—and lost—their lives to procure them for our group. Many did not dare to escape because they had had no opportunity to obtain it or a promise to get the card remained unfulfilled. And now I was holding one in my hands, with my picture and fingerprints, a Warsaw address and an official stamp bearing the hated swastika; it also stated clearly on the “religion” line: Roman-Catholic. While not a guarantee of survival, this document was one of the most important prerequisites.

Besides being a necessity for those living on the Aryan side, the ID card was a useful document for other reasons. It legitimized one’s residence, qualified the bearer for ration cards, facilitated travel, and in general, it afforded greater protection from being sent to Germany as a forced laborer. To me, it also meant that I could start my new job.

My new company's name was WIFO (*Wirtschaftliche Forschungsgesellschaft*). Their business was to construct and maintain fuel oil storage tanks for military use. Civilian Germans supervised and managed the company, security was in the hands of the *Wehrmacht*, and the work force consisted of Poles, Russian prisoners of war, and about two hundred Jews from the nearby camp of Kaweczyn—men and women who were delivered to the *Baustelle* in trucks every morning. Another company, Schmitt and Junk, occupied the same premises. They were also a construction outfit, with no clear distinction between their functions and responsibilities and those of WIFO. Both companies had their main offices in Germany, with branches throughout occupied Europe.

I was introduced to my two German supervisors, one civilian and one military, as well as to six fellow Polish electricians. I was given a navy blue overall and shown a four-room house on the side of the road that was the electricians' workshop. I wanted to jump for joy; everything seemed so rosy, so perfect. Then, a disconcerting thought crossed my mind. Did I know enough to be an electrician? What would happen when they discovered I had no real training in the field, just six-month's experience as an electrician's helper? However, luck was again with me. The German supervisor announced—perhaps because I was the youngest and therefore least experienced—that I would be in charge of the battery room and the tool crib, charging batteries and allocating tools. Only occasionally was I to do repairs on simple electrical devices. My skills would not be put to any major tests.

This was a perfect assignment for me and I could not have been happier. I was paid as much as any of the other men, yet I was single and was renting only a corner bed.

The other electricians had families to feed and had to pay rent for bigger and more expensive accommodations.

My gnawing problem at WIFO—as elsewhere—was that I was haunted by fear and forever insecure about being recognized and betrayed. Each day I faced a new environment, met new people, and was thrown into new situations. Each presented potential danger. The interaction with Germans employers as an employee (rather than a slave), the close working proximity to the electricians and other Poles, the close quarters in the cafeteria—all were a constant concern. I worried over how I would answer personal questions, how would I react to an offhand anti-Semitic remark. Did I act the way a Pole would act? Could they somehow discern that I was not “one of them”? That I was a Jew? I fretted over my demeanor, conscious of my conversations and my facial expressions. This worried me to the point that my anxious look itself probably became a source of suspicion.

Overall, I made several new acquaintances while at WIFO, some in the cafeteria at lunchtime, others while walking the three miles after work to the tram stop. One was a blond, blue-eyed boy my age called Wladek Warzajtys; the other was Roman, tall and slim with sandy-colored hair and freckles, a few years older than I. Roman always carried a briefcase with some papers, which may have been just to show off the fact that he was more important because he worked in the office.

The six other electricians were more or less a congenial group, mostly family men, professional in their work and “live and let live” types, socially. During the lunch hour (which lasted only thirty to forty minutes) the conversations centered on trivialities or involved swapping dirty jokes. Two of the electricians stood out from the

group—a man named Szemanski who was exceptionally affable and pleasant. He was good-humored and jovial, and always carried a dog-eared paperback book in the side pocket of his jacket. With an almost permanent smile on his face, he read his book whenever there were a few minutes of free time. We all had the impression that he was reading a suspense novel that he could not put down. He was intelligent and obviously educated as his command of Polish was excellent. He was also very helpful to me whenever I was stuck with a problem or did something wrong. Most of the others were also helpful but he did it more discreetly than the others, whispering advice in a fatherly way.

The other notable figure was Urban. Tall and husky looking, he was the opposite of Szemanski, always grouchy, rude, loud and domineering, often cursing and never smiling. He was also, for me, the most dangerous of my co-workers. He was a vicious anti-Semite whose every second sentence contained some derogatory reference to the Jews, using the insulting term, “*Zydki*” (Jew boys). He was particularly nasty to me. I didn’t know whether he disliked me personally or if he hated me because he suspected that I was a Jew. In either case he posed a daily danger and I tried to avoid him as much as possible. One day, not long after joining the group, after I had finished repairing an electric iron, I plugged it into the receptacle, to prove that it now worked. At that moment, to my surprise, a cloud of white smoke rose from the iron. I became concerned, of course, until I saw Urban nearby puffing cigarette smoke into a narrow rubber tube attached to the bench where the iron was sitting. Everyone thought this to be a funny practical joke—all except Szemanski and me.

After the war, on my first visit to Warsaw, I made a special effort to find Szemanski. I wanted to tell him that I was a Jew and to thank him for being always so friendly and sympathetic when we worked at WIFO. I found him living in a modest one-bedroom apartment in Praga, the sector of Warsaw on the eastern bank of Vistula. When I entered his home, his smile was broader than ever before: "I knew it all along," Szemanski said, when I told about my true identity. "Before the war I was a high school teacher in a school with many Jewish students and you looked like one of my students." He then told me in how much danger I was because of Urban. "As nasty as he was in your presence, Urban was outright threatening behind your back. He did not want you in our group," he told me. "More than once I had to scold him for accusing you of being Jewish. 'I taught in a Catholic school and Zenon was in that school, so I know that he is not Jewish'" I told Urban and the others. Szemanski also told me how delighted he was that I had survived the war.

Chapter 10: A LIFE WITH SUBSTANCE

About six weeks after my escape from the Tomaszow Labor Camp I decided to join the Jewish Underground. By that time, I considered myself to be well settled. I had a secure and well-paid job as an electrician for WIFO. My corner bed in the Spoczynskis' one-bedroom apartment was minimal, but comfortable—at least by an ex-camp inmate's standard—and I had some free time evenings and Sundays. I also felt reasonably safe and at ease in my new surroundings, especially in my contacts with the Polish population. The most compelling reason, however, was that I wanted to take part in the struggle against the Nazi enemy.

Except for my experience at the hands of the blackmailers Janina and Zygmunt, and my uneasiness about Urban, almost all of my encounters with Poles had been, so far, positive. The head electrician at the *Tischlerei* knew very well that the passport picture he had taken of me was for a false Polish ID Card; the three members of the Szokalski family hid me during the critical days of the liquidation of the camp when the city was swarming with the SS and Gestapo; Mrs. Szewczykowa was fully aware of my escape plans and hid the stolen Nazi stamp for me; and the lady in Tomaszow acted as go-between for me with my Aunt Marysia and kept the addresses of contacts in Warsaw for me. They all knew who I was, they all helped me and some, like the Szokalskis and the lady in Tomaszow, had never even met me beforehand. They all risked their lives helping a stranger, without any monetary gain.

In particular, Yitzhak's inspiring appeal for action at our last AKIBA meeting never left me. His words were indelibly etched in my mind and I was driven to act upon

them. Yitzhak's call for taking a stand against passivity and quiet compliance, to actively bring about—with purpose and initiative—our own survival and that of others, prepared me to now take on additional risks; to see what the Jewish Underground movement was all about and see how I could be useful.

I approached Kuba, whom I was now seeing two to three times a week. Although he did not belong to any resistance organization, he seemed to have the contacts; he always had the latest political and world news and occasionally shared with me Underground newsletters. When I asked him to arrange a meeting with a member of the Jewish Underground, he did so promptly. Within a few days, he informed me that the following Sunday I was to meet a representative of the *Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa* (ZOB) at a tram station on the corner of Aleje Jerozolimskie and Nowy Swiat. “He will be waiting for you on the bench,” Kuba told me. “But what does he look like? How will we recognize each other?” I asked. Unable to give me any details or any descriptive features of the man I was to meet, Kuba, with a slight smile replied, “You will recognize each other. I don't know how, but we always do.”

I spent the next four days in restless anticipation. I wondered who the mysterious man might be. I tried to imagine on what secret and daring missions I might be sent. In my mind, the word “resistance” conjured up all sorts of ideas and images of fascinating intrigues and dangerous, daring situations.

Sunday finally came. As excited as I was about my new undertaking, I kept it secret. When I met Marysia that Sunday morning—as I did every Sunday—I did not say a word about my forthcoming meeting with the ZOB man. For her own safety and

perhaps mine I kept that information, as well as all other underground activities, secret from her throughout the war, although I am convinced that she surmised much of it.

Anxious to allow myself enough time to find the location, I left Marysia a little earlier than usually and arrived for the meeting at least an hour-and-a-half before the appointed time. I went to the meeting place and found the correct bench. As I still had plenty of time left, and to distract my mind and ease the tension, I ventured into the immediate neighborhood, on a mini-tour of the city. It was summer and the weather was warm and pleasant. I strolled around Warsaw, taking in the beauty of the city, rich in historical landmarks, palaces, and monuments, replete with verdant parks, and innumerable churches. The Vistula River, slowly and serenely, and without a single ripple, snaked placidly through the northeastern part of the town. On the other side of the river was the Praga district and beyond it, a suburb called Grochow.

At two o'clock sharp, I returned to the meeting place. Already sitting on the bench was a rather short, skinny, middle-aged man with a flat peasant hat that was lowered all the way to his eyebrows. We made contact with each other at once. The mystery man suddenly did not appear very mysterious after all. He introduced himself simply as Czeslaw although – as I learned later - he was often called “Czeslawu” instead of Czeslaw because of his distinct Yiddish accent. His real name was Jakob “Celek” Celemenski and, with his blondish hair, light eyes, pale complexion, high cheekbones and small nose, he blended easily into the Polish population. At his suggestion, we went for a walk towards the Vistula River, in a direction that had few pedestrians. He asked me the minimum amount of questions, about my living and job situations, my place of origin, and my family. Then he abruptly turned towards me and asked if I was prepared to carry

out Underground activities. With my unequivocal “yes,” Czeslaw proceeded to explain the organization’s goals and two main activities—aiding the partisans in the forests and general support for the remaining Jews, both in the few remaining ghettos and those in hiding on the Aryan side. He then suggested that given my relatively secure situation, I should remain at my workplace and lodgings in Warsaw. As my main goal was to participate in the anti-Nazi struggle in any way I could, I was agreeable to any assignment, anywhere.

Czeslaw and I agreed to meet at the same place the following Sunday when he would introduce me to my direct superior. He shook my hand and parted. I was in a daze but ecstatic, remembering how in the AKIBA meetings we had talked about making a contact with the Underground, like a dream that we all wished to come true but few believed that it would. And now, not only had I made contact with it, I was a part of it.

The next Sunday brought a delightful surprise: my direct superior turned out to be a young attractive brunette named Ala. Ala was from Warsaw and was an active member of ZOB while still inside the ghetto. Her job now was that of courier and I was designated to assist her. Our association, however, did not last long. Within the same week she was reassigned to another task and so, at our second meeting a week later, she introduced me to my new superior, Krysia.

Krysia was another attractive young woman, about twenty-one years old, blonde, with a sparkle in her brown eyes, and a permanent, *à la* Mona Lisa, smile. My impression was that she was quite intelligent, an impression I formed based on her silence rather than words, as she was generally taciturn during our work together. When she did speak, she mostly asked questions and, as a result, she learned all about me, including my last name

and address, while I learned little about her. I knew her first name, that she was from Warsaw, and that she lived with her ailing mother. But I did not know that hiding in her lodging was her fiancée, Henryk, who she later married, or that she also had a brother living in hiding on the Polish side.

Krysia and I lived about two miles from each other, on the eastern side of Vistula, and we took the same number 27 tram home. When we got off at the Rondo Waszyngtona station, we briefly chatted, agreed on our next meeting's time and place, and said goodbye. Invariably, Krysia waited until I disappeared completely from the horizon before starting in the direction of her home. This was not an uncommon precaution in those days, especially if you had others to protect, but it was also typical of Krysia, always responsible, always careful. During our work together for over a year, work that almost always entailed the danger of being unmasked and taken away, I became a great admirer of hers, awed by her courage and dedication.

Although I did not realize it then, the ZOB was an umbrella organization for various political parties and Czeslaw represented only one of them, namely, the BUND, a non-Zionist, Yiddish-promoting, socialist party, the Jewish Labor Party. Neither did I know that there were considerable intra-party rivalries within the ZOB or, that one major organization was not even part of the ZOB. That organization, the *Zydowski Zwiazek Wojskowy* (ZZW), which was on the right of the political spectrum, was a separate fighting force in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and remained separate on the Aryan side. They were bitter ideological enemies. At the time, the political distinctions between the parties, their often opposing agendas and their in fighting were of little concern to me and other young people like me and Krysia.

My assignments as Krysia's assistant consisted mostly of making deliveries of packages and small suitcases, to various destinations for people in hiding; sometimes, the deliveries consisted of envelopes containing monthly subsistence money. These individuals, or at times small groups, maybe two to three members of the same family, could not provide for themselves because their appearance or accent made it too risky for them to leave their hideout. In some cases, the rule not to leave the premises was imposed by the host family in order not to endanger themselves or the hosts. These tasks, even if routine and less glamorous than the assignments I had dreamt about before I had joined the Underground, were crucial tasks. The packages usually contained food and medical supplies; sometimes documents or other necessities, all critical to their survival.

The more difficult, and considerably more risky, work was making deliveries to safe houses at the outskirts of town. For these deliveries, the suitcases were considerably larger and heavier as they contained supplies, ammunition, and weapons for the partisans fighting in the woods. But it was not the weight that worried us. In wartime Warsaw, those who carried suitcases always attracted attention, and not only from the Germans. The Polish police were on the lookout for smugglers, so that they could either confiscate the illegal goods, or extort a bribe for not confiscating it. Then there were common thieves, always ready to snatch a valise—the heavier and bigger the valise, the better.

Generally, it was assumed in the Underground, that it was safer to work in pairs. In case of threatened arrest, one could distract the arresting party while the partner could discreetly slip away with the contraband. Or, should one get arrested, the other one could provide a report on who did the seizure and where the partner was taken. Krysia and I pretended to be a young couple, newly arrived from out of town. Arm in arm, we walked

and talked, trying to look cheerful, carefree, and oblivious to our surrounding. One rule that I remember we had agreed on was never to glance, never to look around, and especially, never to look back. However, to my best recollection we, the “professional” escapees, did not have an escape plan, reluctant, as we were, to think about what might happen to us if we got caught.

Transportation logistics was our biggest challenge. Our travels had to be done mostly by tram and during after-work hours, at exactly the time when Warsaw trams were particularly overcrowded. To make the situation worse, some trams were designated “For Germans only” and were off-limits to us. Those passengers who got on the tram in the central parts of town often had to resort to traveling “grape-style” (*Na winogrona*), hanging on the side of the car, holding onto a window or anything else protruding, with one foot on a step or a wheel axle. A variation of this arrangement was to stand on the junction equipment that connected two trolley cars. For Krysia and me, because we always carried a suitcase or other loads, to stand on the junction equipment was the only option. While we worried about losing our balance or slipping “on the grape,” at least we did not have to worry about being caught as smugglers or, worse, being recognized as Jews. Typically, policeman, blackmailers, and thieves stayed away from this risky travel.

The funds for financial assistance to those in hiding came from two sources. A small portion came from the Polish government-in-exile in London and was channeled through the Warsaw *Delegatura* (its underground representation) and, a newly established organization called ZEGOTA, a committee to help Jews. The largest portion of the aid money, however, came from Jewish organizations abroad—the American Joint Distribution Committee, the Jewish Labor Committee, and others. The money was

provided to the government-in-exile in London, transferred to the *Delegatura* in Warsaw, and then, distributed by the Jewish National Committee. The amount of money received by the Jewish Underground varied greatly depending on the period when it was received. Not many people were knowledgeable about the financial matters of the wartime ZOB, certainly not those at my low level. But neither was it a secret that as the war progressed, increasingly larger amounts were made available to the Underground. Unfortunately, the distribution process in the Underground Warsaw had serious problems. A significant number of needy Jews on the Aryan side never received any financial help. First, many were unaware of the existence of the Jewish organizations and that they had funds; even fewer knew of the existence of ZEGOTA, the Polish organization to aid Jews. Typically, an escapee knew only a few Jews or Poles, sometimes he or she knew no one; when I got to Warsaw, I had only two contacts: an address for Janina and a telephone number for Kuba. The organizations, on the other hand, were aware that there were many needy people in hiding but did not know how to reach them. For the longest time I did not know about assistance funds and neither did my Aunt Marysia or Kuba or Maciej—those who were on the Aryan side the longest and whom I knew best. Never did they suggest applying for financial help when I was penniless and homeless. Yet, according to Jacob Celemski and Gunnar Paulsson, between 8,000 and 9,000 Jews in Warsaw were receiving a monthly subsidy.⁵ How did this happen? Based on what I have learned after the war from other Aryan-side survivors and from other sources, the recipients of regular subsidies were either party activists (like Krysia), party members, who were unable to earn a living in the open and therefore were confined to hiding and, those who happened

to have learned about the help, from those who were receiving it. Each political party within the ZOB, strongly favored their own members.

The organizations had a reversed quandary of how to publicize themselves apart from through the word of mouth and they had to be always extremely careful not to risk exposure.

Distributing financial aid to the ghettos and camps had its own problems. By the end of 1943, almost all of the ghettos and small labor camps in Poland had been liquidated. Their populations had been sent either to the few remaining larger ghettos, such as Lodz or Czestochowa, or had been killed in extermination camps such as Treblinka, Auschwitz or Belsec. The few remaining camps and ghettos were rigidly guarded and hermetically sealed, with Jewish, Polish, or regular German police guards replaced now by Nazi SS and Gestapo troops. The result was that all reliable contacts within the ghettos or camps were lost and the establishment of new channels was almost impossible. Although money was available, providing financial help to the ghettos and camps was extremely difficult, as the surviving inmates were constantly being moved within the camp and out to other camps. In the end, the only channels available to maintain contacts were Underground couriers.

Distributing aid to those on the Aryan side also had its problems. Some, like those in complete hiding, never ventured outside their secret hideout and never saw anyone except one or two protectors who were providing their basic necessities. And even if they heard about aid, they did not know how to obtain it. Because of the essential secrecy, the contacts were made by a word of mouth and only a few knew the right names and places. Conversely, ZOB did not know who was in need and where to find them. There were

others, like me, who lived in the open and neither sought, nor needed, help. People in this category either worked and hence earned money, or had sufficient means of their own. Some who survived the war on the Aryan side never knew of any assistance, from any source. During the time Kryisia and I carried either envelopes or packages and suitcases to and fro, I never even knew what was inside them. Only after the war did Kryisia reveal to me their content.

The financial help from abroad or from ZEGOTA ameliorated many situations and saved the lives of many. But in general, it was too little, too late. Too little, because the early limited amounts were insufficient to either buy off the Nazis or prevent the starvation of the masses. Too late, because by the time the amounts became substantial, perhaps in the millions of dollars, the great majority of European Jewry had been already murdered.

In the spring of 1944, Kryisia told me that the ZOB had more money than they knew what to do with. In his book *A Surplus of Memory: Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, Yitzhak Zuckerman, one of the few surviving leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, reports that during the Polish Uprising in August/September of 1944, when a ZOB safe house on Leszno Street 18 burned to the ground, over a million dollars went up in flames.⁶ How many more millions shared a similar fate, how much money remained at war's end, and what happened to it, we may never know.

⁶ Yitzhak Zuckerman, *A Surplus of Memory: Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*

One of the Jewish workers from the Kaweczyn camp brought to the *Baustelle* WIFO in trucks every morning was a sweet sixteen-year old girl from Berlin named Eva Schuster. She worked in a building right across the street from mine. Eva was pretty, bright-eyed, vivacious, and full of life. It was hard not to develop a special sympathy for her. On some mornings, I would bring her an apple or a chocolate bar, and exchange a few friendly words. With these words, I tried to show her a little compassion, cheer her up and encourage her. But what I really wanted to do was to rescue her. I enlisted the help of Kuba and Krysia, and together we devised a plan to do just that. We saw no major problems: we knew by now how to obtain forged Polish documents, especially the I.D. card; for a hiding place we had some ideas, at least on a temporary basis. Her fair appearance meant that she could easily pass for a Pole and even her Polish was competent. The act of escape itself was quite easy. The *Baustelle* was a vast area, with hundreds of workers and the building she was working in was unguarded. We had all elements in place; an ideal situation.

Towards the end of July we heard rumors that the Kaweczyn Camp was to be liquidated; I knew we had to act quickly if we were to save Eva. Our plan was ready and we now made arrangements to carry it out in the first weeks of August. It was too late, however. One day, at the beginning of August, neither Eva nor the other 199 Jews returned for work at the *Baustelle*. Nobody knew what had happened to the Jews of Kaweczyn, but also, no one seemed to care. The general response was that of silence, a seeming indifference. Ostensibly, my reaction did not differ from that of others either but the fate of these Jews, and especially Eva's fate, preoccupied my thoughts.

We found out what happened to them only on the third day, when our supervisor drove up with a truck and ordered all the electricians to take their toolboxes and come with him: “The Jews are gone and we are going to dismantle all the electrical equipment in their camp.”

Within minutes, we reached a cluster of barracks, located a short distance from the *Baustelle*, on the edge of a forest. As we opened the wide double doors of the barracks, we saw a wall of small black insects, slowly rising from the floor. On the floor, there were scattered pieces of paper—newspaper pages—that were literally moving. A black tidal wave of fleas, thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of them, was moving towards us, randomly changing form within itself. As we entered, they swarmed and attacked us. At first, we tried to repel them with hand motions, or tried to kill the ones that attached themselves to the exposed part of our bodies. We waved cardboard in front of us, but to no avail. They were everywhere, crawling under our clothing, sucking our blood. They had not eaten for full three days, and now they were going after us to satisfy their hunger.

The inside of the barracks was a scene of misery and desolation. The barracks were pitifully bare. For some semblance of privacy, the inmates had crisscrossed the space with strings and attached blankets or linen to them to create rooms and cubicles. The floor was bare ground. There were cots to sleep on and boxes of various shapes and sizes serving as chairs and tables. Papers, clothing and other items were strewn all over. It was clear that the inmates had to get ready on short notice; it could be also assumed that the inmates had an idea about their destination and had been in a panic.

In one such room, on the floor, I found two pictures. One was of Eva, in shadow, standing in the doorway of the building where she had been working next to her German supervisor. The second picture was of an attractive dark-haired young woman, gazing intently and lovingly at pretty girl, about eight years old, who was defiantly staring at the camera. I turned the photograph over and found the names written neatly on the back. It was a picture of Eva with her mother. I slipped both photographs into my pocket.

Without delay, we completed dismantling the electrical equipment, loaded it up and returned to the *Baustelle*. There some of us went straight for the local lake. Except for our shoes, we jumped in fully clothed, hoping that the fleas from the camp would simply drown. This, however, was not the case. I had fleas on me and in my clothing for several weeks.

I was reminded of the people from the Kaweczyn camp some forty years later in Los Angeles, when I attended a social function sponsored by a local survivor organization, “The 1939 Club.” One of my companions at the dinner table was Fred Kort. The conversation drifted to the question “Where were you during the war?” It turned out that Fred was one of those two hundred inmates of Kaweczyn and was a “next door neighbor” to Eva and her mother. As we had suspected then, and as Fred later confirmed, all inmates of the Kaweczyn camp had been sent to the Treblinka extermination camp, where they perished. Fred was one of the very few who managed to escape and survive.

My work in the Underground lasted only slightly over a year, mostly seemed routine and, on the surface, of little significance; often it was limited to sporadic, one-time actions. Yet, this period and all that work were the most exciting and most meaningful of my entire life, before and since. I was filled with a passion and a sense of purpose that had no equal in any other experiences. Life was full of danger, at every corner, at every encounter, but it was also filled with an incredible sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. I gave of myself the most one could give, and it felt good. Although Kryisia and I spent many hours discussing various topics, from ethics to war situation and from our lost youth to future dreams and hopes, we never talked how we felt about our work, about our lives and feelings of the present. Yet, I am quite sure that her experiences evoked the same feelings of purpose and satisfaction that I felt. Many years after the war, we were sitting in a hotel coffee shop, across from the main railroad station in her new hometown of Zurich, Kryisia described those times in Warsaw, as was typical of her, in a uniquely succinct way: "It was a life with substance."

Chapter 11: AVOIDING THE HOTEL POLSKI TRAP

On the third or fourth Sunday after my arrival in Warsaw, Aunt Marysia arrived at Krasinski Park for our regular meeting unusually happy, yet agitated.

“Zenek,” she exclaimed, “Our worrisome days are over. We’re going to be exchanged for Germans held in Allied countries.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, dumbfounded.

She proceeded to tell me about the Hotel Polski, where organizers had set up their headquarters, and where each candidate for exchange was to register. She had already started arrangements for herself and she wanted, and expected, me to do the same.

“We will be getting real visas,” she told me, “Even new foreign passports. We will have the status of aliens.”

She explained that the documents were genuine, from Palestine or South American countries, which had been issued to Jews who were no longer alive. The Gestapo, in possession of these visas after having killed the rightful owners, was now ready to sell them to the Jews hiding on the Aryan side in Warsaw. To give credibility to the scheme Marysia pointed out that some prominent Jews were involved. One of the supposedly prominent people was a certain Mr. David Guzik, the head of the American JOINT Distribution Committee in pre-war Poland; others were from the Jewish Underground. Another reassuring fact, she explained, was that people could enter and exit the hotel freely. Finally, those who had gone on such an exchange earlier had confirmed, by letters, their arrival at a transit camp in Vittel, a city in France, where they claimed the conditions were quite acceptable. “The Germans are treating prospective

Jewish *émigrés* with the same courtesy they normally accorded foreign citizens,” they wrote to their friends who remained in Warsaw.

“This is a unique opportunity to reach the outside world, to reach real freedom, to survive,” Marysia said, trying to persuade me, “Yes, one has to ‘buy’ a place on the list, but don’t worry. We’ll find the funds. Such funds are available from the various underground organizations, Jewish and Polish.”

For Marysia it was not a question of “if” I would sign up, but “when.”

She asked me to accompany her to the hotel, as she had agreed to meet some people there. Reluctantly, I consented, even though I was not convinced that what I had just heard was for real. I could not fathom the notion that all of a sudden the Germans should be trusted again. As we walked in the direction of Długa Street, where the Hotel Polski was located, I suddenly had a change of heart. “I’ll wait for you here, Marysia,” I said, about three blocks short of the hotel. “I’ll just walk around the block. Spend as much time there as you need; I’ll be here, waiting.”

She agreed, and walked on.

While I waited, I got curious. I walked closer to the hotel and began observing the people at the revolving doors. Indeed, there were no Germans in sight. Men and women—I presumed all of them Jewish—walked in and out of the lobby, completely unhindered. Some of these people clearly did not *have* to take this chance, a chance I considered risky. They were well dressed and appeared to blend well with the Polish population.

But images of past experiences were spinning in my head, such as the fate of Mr. Bernstein and his wife and son in the Tomaszow camp. The Nazis had also promised

them that they would be exchanged for German nationals from Switzerland. A Red Cross ambulance came into the camp to pick them up; they were allowed to take with them large suitcases full with personal possessions but instead of being shipped abroad they were taken to the Jewish cemetery and killed.

My understanding of this Gestapo “emigration” plan was not very clear, nor did I know many facts or details about it. But my conclusion about what to do was clear and firm. I decided I would rather throw in my lot with the one million Poles of Warsaw than reveal my identity to those whom I hated the most and trusted the least. This whole scheme did not make one iota of sense to me. When Marysia returned, I told her that I would not be signing up for the “exchange.” She was visibly unhappy, as she did not want to go alone. But I stood firm. I would not join the others. Another week or two passed, and Marysia, too, reconsidered her plans and decided not to go.

The Gestapo, which organized the Hotel Polski affair, went to incredible lengths to give it an authentic appearance. Days before the departure, one of the Jewish registrants for the “exchange” went to the home of a Polish acquaintance to retrieve his belongings which he had left there for safekeeping. But the acquaintance, knowing that the man was about to leave the country, refused to return his belongings. This was not an uncommon occurrence on the Aryan side. What *was* uncommon in this case was that when the registrant complained to the Hotel Polski organizers about the dishonest Pole, they sent two uniformed Germans to the cheat’s home to help the Jew, apparently now a respected and protected foreigner, reclaim his property.

With their foreign visas in hand, those who signed up for the “exchange” were led to their death, either in various camps or murdered in the courtyard of the Pawiak prison.

Among those who perished was my friend Adas Lichtenstein, from AKIBA, the only member of our group whom I later encountered. A week before departure, I met Adas in Warsaw on the Aryan side, shortly after my arrival there. He was tired of pretending to be a Pole, tired of being on the run, tired of hiding, tired of being in constant fear of discovery. He was tired of living, he told me. My fresh zest and enthusiasm did not raise his sinking spirits. On the day the Gestapo offered Jews in hiding the chance to be exchanged for German prisoners in Allied hands, he accepted the offer and joined others at the Hotel Polski. He tried to persuade me to come with him. But I had arrived in Warsaw only a few weeks before and was neither tired nor dispirited. I stood by my decision not to go and tried to convince him not to go but I was unsuccessful.

Of the more than 3500 that assembled at the Hotel Polski, only about forty survived.

Chapter 12: FRIENDS HELPING FRIENDS

In the Tomaszow ghetto, I had known Ludwik only casually. I knew that he was at least seven or eight years older than me, that his name was originally Fredek Lenga, and that he came from a prominent and well-to-do family. I also knew that he had graduated from law school at an unusually young age because of his exceptional intelligence. However, as I later discovered, his intelligence did not extend to practical matters that were essential to surviving on the Aryan side. Although Ludwik had escaped from the Tomaszow Camp a few weeks before I did, his situation was one of continual minor and not-so-minor problems.

One day, in the late summer of 1943, during one of my periodic visits with Kuba, he informed me that Ludwik was in a terrible situation and urgently needed help.

“What kind of help?” I asked. “Lodging? Money? Job?”

“Everything; all of the above,” was the answer. I promised to do what I could.

When I saw Ludwik the next day, he was glassy-eyed and on the verge of a mental breakdown. I brought him to the Spoczynskis,’ where he slept on a cot that we borrowed from a neighbor; exhausted, he slept for two nights and two days. My own accommodations on Solec were not for two people and, at best, only temporary. So I went in search of a new lodging. Finding lodging in wartime Warsaw was a major problem, especially for fugitives. There was a scarcity of places, the city was overcrowded, but, most importantly, apartment owners were afraid to rent to strangers for fear that they may be Jews. Since personal recommendations and references were also hard to get, I resorted to a second best source: the local church. Since moving into the

room on Solec Street, I had attended the Three Crosses Church a few times to establish my new Catholic identity. Attendance at church, particularly for Sunday Mass, was part of my cover. From day one I wore a cross around my neck, and at home, above my bed, there hung a crucifix. Every evening, before going to bed, I knelt and said the evening prayer (*pacierz*); I always left the door slightly ajar, hoping the landlords would notice it. My problem was that I did not know the words to the various prayers, especially the prayers in church. In such cases I would just move my lips. With time, I learned the number count that was equivalent to length of a given prayer; the *pacierz*, for example, required a count to fifty-two.

It was at the church that I noticed there was a bulletin board with all kind of advertisements, including rooms for rent. From its notices I now found a room in the Grochow area, close to my place of work, on Osowska Street. While my landlord knew nothing about me, he assumed, with some reasonable probability, that I was attending the church where he placed the advertisement.

I quickly moved into my new lodging, which meant that Ludwik was able to immediately take over my corner at the Spoczynskis.' I continued to occasionally sleep at the Solec place because, with my busy schedules, I sometimes did not have enough time to get to Grochow before curfew. I also used it as my mailing address. My cardinal rule at this time was to split my life into more than one compartment, and to keep each compartment—to the extent possible—separate from the others. Marysia did not know where I lived or worked, although she had a telephone number where she could leave messages for me. The Spoczynskis would not know where to find me if their life depended on it, and some of my friends only knew where to find me on specific days and

at specific times. These safety precautions were sometimes difficult to keep track of but somehow they all worked. It is amazing how complex or difficult problems find easy solutions, when one's life depends on it.

Ludwik was still in a state of semi-shock, but he was slowly recovering. He had no problem passing for a Pole; his features, his Polish pronunciation, and his demeanor aroused no suspicion. He easily won over Spoczynskis' hearts, judging by the many complimentary comments they made about him. Providing food for him was also no problem as staple items were relatively available and affordable.

Little by little, Ludwik told me his story. While still in the Tomaszow Camp, he sold, or rather signed a promissory note to sell, one of his family's houses to a Polish friend after the war. In return, he received a substantial sum of money. Being financially secure, he and his young wife, who also had Aryan features and spoke flawless Polish, managed to escape to the Polish side of Warsaw. Shortly thereafter, they moved to a nearby resort town, Otwock, settling in one of the many boarding houses used by vacationers before the war. They led a normal and comfortable life, regularly taking long walks through the picturesque countryside. Life was pleasant and carefree and to all appearances, secure.

One day, when they returned from their afternoon walk, their landlords, anxiously awaiting their return, informed them that the Gestapo was looking for them. Further, the landlady told them that she could not let them in because it would endanger them, the landlords, and their family. They were told that they must leave town immediately and never return. She closed the door in their faces, not even allowing them retrieve their belongings.

With only pocket money and the clothes on their backs, they left. For three days, they hid in the surrounding fields. Then, dirty, hungry, and exhausted, his wife could not bear it anymore. Despondent, she took her own life with a cyanide pill.⁷ In despair and confusion, Ludwik left her body in the potato fields. Somehow he managed to get to Warsaw to contact some friends, among them Kuba.

Slowly, at the Spoczynskis, things began to improve for Ludwik and he regained a measure of self-confidence. At the first opportunity, he returned to Otwock to search for his wife's body. He looked everywhere, but there were so many potato fields and they all looked the same. He even made some discrete inquiries but to no avail. He learned, however, that the Gestapo had not been looking for him. The landlords, who had turned blackmailers, invented the Gestapo story to rob Ludwik and his wife of their possessions.

After a few weeks of physical and mental rest, Ludwik applied and got a job as a clerk at the *Baustelle* where I worked. He was assigned a room in the company's barracks, got a certificate stating that he was employed in a war-important enterprise and was fed breakfast and lunch each day. In time, he had regained some sense of safety and self worth, a measure of hope and faith. But not completely. The memory of the tragic loss of his young wife and a fear of blackmailers, lingered.

When Ignac and I said good-bye to each other at the Tomaszow Factory, on the fateful day of my escape, May 28, 1943, our paths diverged into the unknown. We did not know

⁷ At the time, such pills were easily obtainable and most of us carried such pills for the event of capture by the Germans.

if either path would lead to a chance at life or to a certain death, and we wondered if we would ever see each other again. The prospect seemed doubtful, even remote.

Although the question of what had happened to Ignac and other friends from Tomaszow was often in my thoughts, I didn't know how to find out where they were taken or if they were still safe or even alive and, to some extent, I was afraid to find out. So many before had been taken away and never heard from again.

But one day in December the gnawing question of my friend's fate was answered. One evening after work I stopped at the Spoczynski residence to pick up my mail and found a letter from Ignac. I couldn't believe it. He had found a way to communicate with the outside world from inside the Blizyn labor camp and had located Mrs. Szewczykowa, our co-worker in the *Tischlerei* in Tomaszow and the only person to whom I had given my address.

In his letter, he inquired about my health and well being, about Warsaw, about school and work opportunities, living conditions and many other topics. His numerous questions were in code but very clear to me: he was now ready to join me and wanted to know what prospects for survival one could expect in Warsaw. I responded without hesitation or delay that I was doing well, that he and Tetka should "come IMMEDIATELY," and that "in Warsaw one COULD survive!"

I received one more letter from Ignac. But to my astonishment, before I managed to mail my response, Ignac arrived in Warsaw. It was December 16, 1943.

Ignac turned up at the address I had left with Mrs. Szewczykowa, Solec 49, but by that time I was living in Grochow on Osowska Street. My visits to my old "corner" lodging on Solec Street did not happen very often but on that day, I stopped by to pick up

my mail and briefly greet the elderly Mrs. Spoczynski. Then, I saw Ignac. He was sitting with his back to the entrance door but I recognized him instantly. I couldn't believe how quickly he had managed to get here. We were at a loss for words. Ignac appeared to be in a daze and at the point of exhaustion. He looked like someone who had had no food or sleep for days. His eyes expressed uncertainty, apprehension, and confusion, his clothing was in tatters. I repeatedly patted him on the back and whispered, "It's good you are here, it's good you are here." I was overcome with happiness that he had taken this critical step towards survival.

The Spoczynski place had a large room, a corridor and a kitchen. It did not provide much privacy for a conversation, but Ignac managed to whisper something about the critical situation "they" were in. When he used the plural I thought that he was referring to Tetka and wondered where she might be hiding. Then Ignac said something about escaping from the camp with "another fellow," a friend named Stasiek.

In the two letters I had received from Ignac, Stasiek's name was never mentioned. I asked Ignac where Stasiek was but he was fearful of doing so in my landlord's presence, blurting out something about "downstairs" and "public toilets." At first, I did not fully grasp what he was trying to tell me, but then I realized that Stasiek was hiding around the communal toilets. I was incredulous. What could be more suspicious than a stranger hanging around all night in such an unsavory place? The danger of such a situation was hard to imagine or comprehend and even harder to explain.

Indeed, Stasiek was at that moment curled up in a wall recess, close to communal toilets and above a large trash bin, both on the ground floor of our building. Ignac and Stasiek had spent most of the day there, hungry and cold, waiting for me. After their

escape from the camp, they had walked for miles from one village to another, sometimes on and sometimes off the road, through fields and forests. In the dark, local blackmailers, thieves, and other criminals had robbed them of their few possessions. Even their meager winter clothing had been taken from them. Penniless, and with no place to spend the first few nights, the future looked bleak and hopeless.

As the day was rapidly coming to an end, many problems had to be resolved. The main dilemma was lodging; but they also needed food, clothing, documents, and a place to spend their time during the day. They had to be educated about the “dos” and “don’ts” of life in hiding, how to keep themselves, and others, safe. The problem in Aryan Warsaw was that here, the sum of one plus one was greater than two. There was a saying at the time: “One Jew looks like one Jew, but two Jews look like three.”

Quickly, we had to dispense with niceties and determine what to do. I turned to Mrs. Spoczynska, “Is my bed still available?” “Yes, of course,” she answered. “We would like to take it for Ignac; I’ll pay for him for now. Later we’ll find him a job and there will be no problem paying the rent.” She immediately agreed. I had always got along well with both her and her husband and they happily tolerated my frequent switching of tenants for their rental bed, for Ignac was neither the first “sub-boarder,” nor the last. At different times, over the year or so of my stay in Warsaw, the Solec lodging saw a total of six Jews, four friends, one relative, and myself. This modest lodging was their safe haven in time of dire need.

The burning problem of the moment was what to do with Stasiak. Putting him and Ignac together in one bed would have been not only awkward but also suspicious, especially since his name was never mentioned before. Taking him to my place was too

risky for both of us. It was finally decided that Stasiek would remain in his current awkward accommodation for at least that night, perhaps longer. The curfew hour was soon approaching and I had to get home to Grochow. “I will be back tomorrow, early; I’ll see what I can bring,” I told them, and said farewell.

Early the next morning I collected food and some pieces of clothing—some of which I’d bought just days before—packed it all into a small suitcase, and headed for Solec Street. On the way, I bought some dark bread and sausage, knowing well that the “tea” from apple peels would be provided by the landlady. I could not stay long, as I had to rush back to work, where I would try to figure out what to do with my two guests, especially Stasiek.

I urgently needed to enlist help. At the top of the list of those to contact was my Aunt Marysia, and then Maciej Monszajn, a family friend who was always helpful and resourceful. He was blond, blue-eyed, with a pug nose and a light complexion and possessed exceptionally enterprising talents. For most of us it was difficult enough just to survive on Aryan papers; Maciej managed to start—and succeed in—several businesses.

I also contacted Kuba Rajzman, who had given me such good advice and contacts at the beginning. The need to find Stasiek a place to stay was becoming urgent. I had heard that while Stasiek was still sound asleep in the recess above the trash bin, about six o’clock in the morning a tenant in the apartment building entered the rest room and noticed the unusual stranger. He woke him up and asked what he was doing there. Stasiek mumbled something and then begun repeating: “I am a Pole, I am a Pole.” The man told him sternly to move out from there, to move on, but also wished him good luck. Then he added, “I am from the same parish” (*Jestem z tej samej Parafii*), the equivalent to saying

“I am a member of the same tribe.” This was a lucky break for Stasiek; another tenant may not have been that charitable. There was a reason for this man’s friendliness: he was the other Jewish tenant in the building, the one who told Kuba about the “vacancy” at the Spoczynski apartment when I was first looking for lodging. He and I never met but he often complained to Kuba that, with all the strangers I was bringing home, I was endangering the entire neighborhood!

The next evening, Stasiek, Ignac, and I met at Maciej’s latest place of business, a vinegar distribution outfit on Chlodna Street. We had many things to discuss, all of the utmost urgency. Stasiek needed a place to stay; both of them needed documents, more clothing, and cash. They also needed a place to pass the days; to aimlessly pace the streets was extremely dangerous. Luckily, Ignac had a diamond that his mother had sewn into his long johns, which he now vowed to sell. In the meantime, Maciej not only allowed Stasiek to stay overnight, he even offered both of them temporary jobs. “You boys are too young to die,” he told them. Because of his perfect Aryan features,” I adopted Maciej as my uncle and let him visit me from time to time. On such occasions, I would make sure to introduce him to my landlord and neighbors, to dispel any suspicions they might have had about me. I always made it clear that he was from my mother’s side, in order to explain his different surname.

Slowly, and with the help of many, some problems found resolutions. Ignac and Stasiek did not go hungry; they received warm winter clothing, and the process to obtain Polish ID cards was set in motion. Fortunately, the Underground organizations were very skilled in producing authentic-looking cards without the major involvement of the applicant. In many cases all that was needed was a proper photo. Ignac sold his diamond,

through Maciej, for about 20,000 zloty and, so, even money was no longer a problem for him.

Yet, while Ignac had a place at the Spoczynskis,' Stasiek's accommodations remained a major problem. Finding him a place of his own was extremely difficult and, besides, he could hardly afford it. Any temporary or shared lodging was likely to arouse suspicion. Because he spoke Polish with a Yiddish accent, he needed a hideout where his landlord or host would be aware of his identity. We tried hard and did what we could. Stasiek stayed a few nights with Ludwik, who now had a room at my *Baustelle*. In the evening, Stasiek entered the room through a window in the back of the barrack and went out the same way in the morning. Then, I found him a place for a few days with a distant relative of mine, Helenka Flattow, who lived in Mala Wies, near Warsaw. Helena was my cousin Marta's aunt who, with her little son Stan, also lived on Aryan papers. Her husband, an officer in the Polish Army, had been taken prisoner by the Russians in the 1939 campaign and then killed, along with 15,000 other Polish officers, in the Forest of Katyn. (Stasiek found and visited Helenka, in Israel, in an old age home, some fifty years later. He wanted to thank her for her wartime hospitality.)

The long-term problem was how to settle these two men without exposing them—and through them, all of us—to the danger of being recognized as Jews. Both Ignac and Stasiek had problems blending in with the Polish population. While Ignac's fluent Polish was a definite advantage it was not sufficient to counterbalance his stereotypical Jewish looks. Stasiek's problem was just the opposite: while he looked very much like a Pole, with blue eyes, straight blond hair and sharp facial features, his Polish was faulty. There were only a few words that he either mispronounced or pronounced with a different

inflection, but those few words were enough to reveal that his mother tongue was Yiddish, rather than Polish. The Germans would not have recognized the accent, but blackmailers listened for it and became extremely skilled at “detecting” Jews. Even occasional mispronunciations were enough to help them uncover their victims.

Both Ignac and Stasiek would face serious problems if they were to remain hiding in Warsaw, and they could seriously endanger others around them. We were all very concerned over what to do with them. One idea we had—which never, however, became a reality—was to have Ignac and Stasiek always walk together, with Ignac pretending to be blind and Stasiek acting as though he were deaf and mute. In accordance with local custom, Ignac would carry a white cane and wear large dark glasses (in addition to an oversized peasant hat that would cover half of his head), while Stasiek would wear a yellow armband with three black dots. If the need arose, Ignac would be the only one to talk.

Before we could implement this rather bizarre plan, a better solution appeared to solve our problem. The *Baustelle* for which I was working, the WIFO and the Schmitt & Junk construction companies, was in the process of establishing a new branch in Riga, Latvia. They needed workers in various categories. For this purpose they had opened a special recruitment office at Wiejska Street, in Warsaw. We jumped at the opportunity, especially since I knew one of the clerks in the new office—Roman, my friend who used to work at the *Baustelle* in Grochow. Still, this was also a risky undertaking: each prospective worker would have to go through a registration process and a possible medical examination. Also there could be a police investigation upon crossing the border into the vast territories of the conquered Soviet Union. But we didn’t have many

alternatives, especially for Stasiek. Thus, Stasiek, by default became our guinea pig.

We were hopeful that a workplace outside occupied Polish territory would provide safe refuge for hunted escapees and others who had difficulty finding safe places in Warsaw. As we correctly assumed, the people who ended up working in Riga were of many nationalities and ethnic backgrounds, and spoke a variety of languages. Blending in there was considerably easier than in homogenous Warsaw, where most, if not all, workers were Poles. In Riga, with many languages spoken, everyone had an accent.

Three and a half weeks after his arrival in Warsaw, Stasiek was on his way to Riga, and Ignac and I anxiously awaited his first letter. We were sure of one thing: at least Stasiek would no longer have to sleep in a public toilet or above the communal trash bin. Soon, letters from Stasiek began to arrive and we were relieved to discover that the messages were consistently positive.

Ignac also decided to join Stasiek in Riga but, before leaving Warsaw, he decided to rescue his girlfriend Tetka, his brother Heniek, and Heniek's wife Halinka from the Blizyn Camp. Barely three weeks after his own escape, and with scant time to obtain the three false ID cards, Ignac embarked on a trip back to Blizyn. Given the circumstances and Ignac's "Semitic" features, this undertaking was so daring and courageous that it bordered on madness. In Blizyn, with the help of a Polish peasant, Mr. Wrona, who had helped him carry on our correspondence, he delivered the three sets of false documents to Heniek.

But something went terribly wrong. Possibly denounced, the SS caught Heniek and Halinka red-handed with the documents and threw them in the camp's jail. Tetka avoided a similar fate by sheer luck; Heniek had delivered her ID card to her barrack

before his arrest. Knowing their fate and not wanting to go through torture, both Heniek and Halinka attempted suicide by cutting their veins at the elbows. As their blood slowly seeped away, they lost consciousness. The Germans discovered their almost lifeless bodies when they came to interrogate them. They were sent to a hospital and the personnel were ordered to bring them back to life—the SS desperately wanted to trace the documents to their source. They knew full well that the false documents had been produced by the Underground, and they wanted Heniek and Halinka to disclose from whom, through whom, and how they obtained the documents, before putting them to death.

The next day, in a surprising reversal of fortune, as if by a miracle, the labor camp was transformed into a concentration camp and an entirely new administration took over. The new camp commander ordered that their lives be spared. After they left the hospital they joined the other inmates.

Ignac's attempt to rescue his loved ones, however, had failed, and he returned to Warsaw, safe but heartbroken.

On February 10, 1944, Ignac departed for Riga. The same company, Schmitt and Junk, employed him as an electromotive mechanic. His letters confirmed Stasiek's earlier assessments regarding not only the living and working conditions but more importantly, their excellent chances for survival.

Stasiek and then Ignac were the first of my friends and acquaintances with Aryan papers to go to Riga's *Baustelle*, but not the last. Next to go were Ludwik, then Janek, and then a few others whose names I don't recall. Whenever I heard that someone was in trouble, I would direct him or her to Riga. I also spread the word through Krysia, Kuba,

and Maciej. One day I received a letter from Ludwik with a plea: “Zenek, do not send any more of ‘ours.’ We are now in the majority.” He added that Jews numbered thirteen out of twenty-five foreign workers there.

Every hidden Jew who went to work for the Schmitt and Junk *Baustelle* in Riga—all thirteen of them—survived the war.

Chapter 13: MIECZ I PLUG

While I volunteered for the Jewish ZOB, I was drawn by circumstances into two other—this time Polish—Underground organizations. One was *Miecz i Plug* (the Sword and Plough), the other, *Gwardia Ludowa* (the People's Guard). These two organizations were rather extreme and mortal enemies that fought each other almost as much as they did the Germans. Moreover, if it were known that someone belonged to both groups, he or she would be suspected of being a plant by the other group, an *Agent Provocateur*, or an infiltrator, and could have been killed by either of them, whoever discovered it first. But when I joined these groups I did not know any of this. I thought that all underground organizations were groups of Polish patriots, fighting against the same, German enemy. I was eighteen then, but, politically, my naiveté and inexperience reflected an apolitical, prewar youngster of fourteen or less. Neither of the two organizations knew of my work with the ZOB.

My involvement with the *Miecz i Plug* organization happened quite by accident. I was introduced to it by Wladek Warzajtys, a tall, blond, blue-eyed boy who I met soon after I started working for WIFO. He was rather shy but pleasant and intelligent. Unlike most workers there, he was my age. We chatted during lunch, in the cafeteria, and after work, while walking to the tram stop in Grochow. Wladek was devoutly religious and interested in furthering his education, but his first and overriding interest and devotion was to fighting the Nazis; he was a true Polish patriot, ready to sacrifice for the Fatherland. No matter where our discussion started, it invariably ended on what we could do to sabotage and defeat our bitter enemy. In this, we were in total agreement. In the

weeks that followed, Wladek provided me with Underground leaflets daily and kept me informed about world news from Allied sources.

As time went by and Wladek and I became close friends, he suggested that I join his Underground group, the *Miecz i Plug*. I had never heard of the group and assumed that this was just one of the several organizations that belonged to the main Polish Underground, *Armja Krajowa* (Home Army), fighting the Nazis. Apart from joining the group for obvious, patriotic reasons, I signed on primarily because to refuse could have made me suspect, not only to him but also to his superiors, who knew of the invitation. Under the circumstances, I was convinced that there really was no other choice but to say yes. I kept from him my membership in the ZOB, simply because secrecy regarding *any* resistance movement was paramount. I attended a couple of gatherings in a dark basement on Marszalkowska Street and met a few of his friends, but it was mostly Wladek who was my contact. There was no formal induction of any kind and, as with the ZOB, only first names were exchanged. Then, when the Marszalkowska hideout was uncovered one night, I never saw the other members again. I continued to see Wladek only because we both worked at WIFO.

One day, Wladek announced that the organization needed a motorcycle and that he and I must get one. The plan was that I would find a motorcycle at the *Baustelle*, somewhere within the pool of motor vehicles, and take it to the side of my tool/battery building, presumably for the purpose of charging its battery. This was the easy part. For the rest, Wladek would remain hidden behind my battery building until after dark, at which time he would move the cycle quietly, without driving it, to my lodging at 37

Osowska Street. He would spend the night with me and then, after the curfew was over, would drive the motorcycle to its destination.

Contrary to reason and elementary caution, I agreed to every last detail of the plan even though, in wartime, stealing a piece of military equipment, transporting stolen military goods, or harboring those who did the above, was sabotage of the first order and punishable by death. I did not ask Wladek any questions and, more importantly, I did not prepare any answers in case I was caught. I had a vague notion that my inability to operate a motorcycle might somehow mitigate my culpability. Today, when I think of this venture—and a few like it—I can only conclude that I had more luck than brains.

In any case, we accomplished what we had set out to do without incident and “Operation Motorcycle” was a total success.

Early one morning, a few days after the motorcycle affair, Wladek approached me.

“I have something for you,” he whispered, “I’ll see you after work.”

My curiosity was piqued and I anxiously awaited day’s end. When we arrived at my place on Osowska Street, Wladek handed me a Parabellum revolver, telling me that it was mine to keep for possible future actions or for self-defense. This was the last thing I had expected, and I was not sure how to react. I thanked him as though this was a predictable reward. Although I had no idea what I would do with it, I recognized its symbolic, as well as its potential future, value. Apropos, Krysia had told me that when the Jewish fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto were preparing to resist further German deportations, the ZOB requested from the *Armja Krajowa* a shipment of weaponry for the upcoming uprising. After lengthy negotiations and at a substantial price, the Polish

underground agreed to provide the ZOB with a meager ten revolvers, although, later, there were other, larger shipments. That, however, demonstrates how valuable they were considered at the time. And now I held a revolver, my own, in the palm of my hand.

A few weeks later, Wladek provided me with another weapon: a grenade. Then, while walking to work one day, I found a second grenade lying by the side of the road. I picked it up as casually if it were only a rock, slipped it into the pocket of my jacket, and marched on. It never crossed my mind that it could have accidentally exploded, killing me and others around me.

The revolver and the two grenades constituted my “war” arsenal.

One day in the early spring of 1944, I found out from Marysia that my cousin Marta, who had also been living on the Aryan side, was imprisoned in a Polish jail in Ursus, a small town near Warsaw. I mentioned this to Wladek, merely informing him that she was an acquaintance of mine. Immediately, a plan was born and Wladek and I embarked on another risky and reckless adventure—Marta’s rescue from the police precinct jail. The following Sunday afternoon, armed only with a bag containing half a dozen apples, Wladek and I made our way to Ursus. For my part, I failed to consider the consequences for me if Marta was in jail for being Jewish or if she revealed that we were related. I did not think about how Wladek would react if he knew my true identity. All these possibilities could have affected our friendship, jeopardized my membership in the

Underground, and even endangered my life. But as these scenarios and questions never occurred to me, I never sought answers to them and we proceeded with our plan.

With Wladek on the lookout, I went into the precinct's courtyard and faced a one-story building. At the far end of the building was the jail with three windows, each with bars except at the very top where there was an open wooden slat. I called out "Miss Marta," and from the second window a voice came back, "Who is it?" I said that it was Mr. Zenek, that Marysia sent me, and that I wanted to know if she needed anything. We exchanged a few words, I gave her my landlord's name and address, threw the six apples into the top opening, said goodbye, and left. On the way back to Warsaw, Wladek and I considered the possibilities of a rescue.

A week later, without informing me of his plan, Wladek returned to Ursus with a friend of his. Late in the evening, after dark, they cautiously approached the gray, low building of the police station, cut the telephone wires entering the building, and, with a revolver drawn, Wladek entered the office and confronted the lone policeman while his friend remained in the entrance hall on the look-out.

"We want Marta. Don't ask any questions," he demanded. The policeman knew better than to ask questions, aware that he was dealing with the Underground. There was, however, a minor problem: Marta was no longer there. The German police had taken her, and some others, to Warsaw, for interrogation. Wladek and his friend returned home empty-handed. Nonetheless, when I learned about this second escapade to Ursus, I was tremendously impressed and felt a deep indebtedness to Wladek. His effort was beyond anyone's obligation to a friend and he proved to be not only a good friend, but a courageous young man that was willing to risk his own life to save another.

Within a few days, on a moonless evening and ten minutes before the curfew, there was a knock on the door at the Spoczynski residence where I was visiting. It was Marta and she needed a place to spend the night. I introduced her to my landlords as a family friend and asked if she could stay. “Yes, of course, what else can she do?” Mrs. Spoczynski answered and, so, Marta stayed in one corner of the room while I took up my old corner. We spent two or three nights like that and then I returned to my lodging in Grochow.

During those few days, Marta and I never talked about why she was in jail in Ursus, what had happened during her interrogation by the Gestapo, or how she managed to be released. She did tell me, however, that her mother and older sister were still in a small labor camp in Skarzysko-Kamienna and that she wanted to go there to see if she could help them. I volunteered to make the trip for her and, a few days later I took a train to Skarzysko. I located the camp, a row of two-story barracks behind barbed wires in a lightly wooded area. But the surrounding silence heralded a bad omen: the inmates were no longer there.

When I came to see Marta and pick up my mail a week or two later, she was gone. Now it is quite true that on the Aryan side, discretion and secrecy were the order of the day.” But Marta brought these two behavioral qualities to a new level: she disappeared just as mysteriously and unexpectedly as she had arrived.

After the war I found out that the *Miecz i Plug* organization was very far to the right in the political spectrum, militantly anti-Semitic, and that, post-war, the leadership of this organization was accused of collaboration with the Germans and persecuted.

My association with the *Miecz i Plug* group could have ended with the loss of my life. At the time, though, I knew nothing about this group's political views or attitude toward Jews or, their extreme animosity towards the political Polish left. By joining them I exposed myself to enemies, literally, on all sides: within the group, outside the group on the left and on the right, in addition to the German's threat as a Pole, as a Jew and, as a member of the Resistance. Yet, in all likelihood, even if I had known this, I still would have joined. First of all, I was ready to join the devil himself to work against the Nazis. Secondly, doing otherwise would have been very suspicious and thus dangerous to my own survival. It was rare in those times that a young, healthy Pole refused to join the Resistance when invited to do so. But, had I known, I would have probably kept my distance from the other members of the organization, even perhaps from Wladek.

I have always wondered what Wladek's reaction to me would have been if he had known that I was a Jew. I can only surmise that he would have remained a good friend; I am sure that he would have helped me if I needed help; but I am equally sure that he would never have involved me in his group.

Chapter 14: GWARDIA LUDOWA

Roman was the other co-worker at WIFO whom I befriended. A few years older than me, Roman and I mostly ran into each other walking towards Grochow, after work. He was usually better dressed than most workers and always carried a briefcase. As I found out later he held a degree in civil engineering, although at WIFO he was not working as an engineer but as a clerk. He was always aware of current events and overall a bit of a mystery. From the time we first met, there was a strange affinity, which was soon explained—we each figured out that the other one was Jewish.

After several weeks, Roman was transferred to our company's offices in Warsaw proper. The number of our encounters diminished but did not stop. One day, Roman confided in me that he was involved with yet another Underground, and asked if I would help. Without asking the name of his organization—it was only later that I found out it was called *Gwardia Ludowa* (the People's Guard)—or about its political agenda, my answer was simply, “when do I start?” As it turned out, he had already a task in mind for me that might have been the same task that he had performed when he was working at the WIFO *Baustelle*. After the war, when I questioned Roman about how he had found enough confidence in me to reveal his underground activities, he replied: “Out of carelessness...” (*Z nieostroznosci!*), referring to my work in the other two underground organizations.

From the window of the battery room in which I worked, there was a clear view of the main East-West railroad track. Every hour or two the track would carry trains heading eastward or westward. The eastbound trains were freight trains loaded with all kind of equipment and weaponry, from motorcycles with side baskets to tanks and heavy

artillery. The westbound trains were either freight trains full of wood cases or passenger trains with large Red Cross markings, carrying soldiers wounded on the Russian front. My job was to keep a record of the number of trains, the number of cars on each train, and the type of weapons or load it carried. Similarly, I was to record the trains with wounded soldiers. Twice a week, in the evening, I traveled to Warsaw to deliver the information to Roman. Usually we would meet in front of the Polytechnic building. Waiting for my data, but standing on the opposite side of the street was Loga Sowinski, Roman's superior.⁸

One day, as I was scribbling and rearranging some records for Roman at my desk in the battery room, my German military supervisor, Ernst, walked in. Quickly, I put the sheets of paper I was working on into a book, placed the book on a shelf and pretended to be cleaning my desk. Ernst appeared to be suspicious and asked that I fetch something for him from a nearby storage building. When I came back, the book was back on my desk and Ernst, pointing his finger at the sheets of paper inside, asked, "What are these, Zenon?" I mumbled something about playing a game, a numbers game, and apologized for doing it during working hours. He did not seem convinced but could not figure out what the numbers and scribbling meant. Nervously, I continued to apologize for playing on the job, and finally, he shook his head and walked out.

A few weeks later, on my way to Warsaw carrying my reports for Roman, German gendarmes stopped the tram in the middle of the Poniatowski Bridge. "All out," they ordered. I swiftly folded the three pages and stuck them behind me, between the upright and the horizontal parts of the seat. I was scared not only because of the reports I carried; I also worried that I would be taken as a hostage just for being young, male, and

⁸ In post-war Poland, Loga became the head of the powerful Labor Union of Poland.

Polish. There were daily, random “round-ups” (*lapanki*) of Poles by German police looking for young men to be jailed for future use as hostages, often machine-gunned to death in public as reprisals for Polish underground activities. In this case, however, the Germans were looking for someone specific and, after checking our documents, let us back on the tram. When we returned to the tram, an elderly woman sat down onto my seat and no words of persuasion, no pleading on my part, would make her change seats with me. While people did not understand why she was so stubborn, neither did they understand why I was so insistent. Uneasily, I waited until she got off the tram and then I returned to the seat to retrieve my papers. I arrived at my appointment an hour late.

One day in May 1944, when I returned home to my Osowska Street lodging, I found on my table an empty telegram envelope. It seemed a little odd to me but I did not think much of it. It was not long, though, until I found out its significance. Later that evening my landlord, Zbig Janowski, professing regret, informed me that he wanted me to move out, preferably as soon as possible but no later than a week or two. He said he had received a telegram that his father was coming to stay with him. I suspected that this was not the reason for the eviction. In all likelihood, he, or someone else in the building, had figured out that I was a Jew. Usually, in such cases, the eviction would be instantaneous, sometimes with the explanation that the tenant’s presence endangered his and his family’s life; other times it could be worse in that the tenant was denounced by their landlord to the Germans with a small reward for himself. But Janowski did not denounce

me. He might have been a good and decent man, simply concerned with his family's safety. He might also have been worried about my activities in the Polish Underground, of which he was quite aware as I made it a practice to "accidentally" leave a copy of one or more Underground leaflets scattered around my room. I usually "forgot" it under my pillow or inside a book I happened to be reading. This practice was useful for more than one reason. It earned me respect from landlords who were patriotic and, at the same time, provided me a cover for being so tightlipped about my comings and goings. I know that such was the case at the Spoczynskis' and I had hoped it would also be true at the Janowski lodging. Another possibility was that Janowski had discovered my revolver and the two grenades hidden in the corner of my straw mattress. He may have been afraid to denounce or rudely evict me and, so, he tried to do it quietly and amicably.

In any event, within days I moved to another house on Kiprow Street 5, in the same general area. I found the new place the same way I found the last one and how most Polish renters did: through the bulletin board at the local church. My new landlady was a young mother with a five-year-old girl; her husband was a prisoner of war somewhere in Russia, taken in the 1939 campaign. My new accommodations were a considerable upgrade from the Janowski place and a giant step above the Spoczynskis' bed in the corner of their room. The apartment had indoor plumbing, a small refrigerator in the kitchen, and even a small balcony. In addition, my rent included a daily supper, prepared by the young lady. My biggest problem was that I now had to find a new hiding place for my revolver and the two grenades; the place had to be inconspicuous yet easily accessible, inconspicuous yet easily accessible so that I could retrieve the weapons, if needed, at a moment's notice. For this I built a false bottom in one of the corners of a

large standing wardrobe closet.

Late in June 1944, an unexpected caller visited me at my battery room. Mr. Miertsching was the vice president of WIFO, a tall slim man, about fifty years of age, with dark hair, piercing brown eyes, sunken cheeks and an olive complexion. On the grapevine, where each executive had a stamp of approval or disapproval by the employees, no one seemed to know much about him or why, at his relatively young age, he was not in a uniform somewhere on the front. He might have been wounded and released from service or, maybe he was a specialist and, as such, exempt from service or perhaps he knew somebody very high up. However, my immediate concern was why he was now visiting me.

Miertsching sat down, leaned close and in a low voice whispered, “Zenon, I need a contact with the Polish Underground. Can you help me?”

A sickening wave of fear rolled over me and my mind raced as I tried to think of how to react. My thoughts were frantic; did my German employers know about my Underground activities? And, if they did, did they know more than that? Conscious of my demeanor, I hardly knew how to react. I prayed that my facial expression would not reveal my utter terror. I searched the face of the man sitting calmly in front of me, looking for any sign that would tell me if he was sincere or whether this was a trap. He stared evenly back at me, waiting for an answer, his hands clasped and relaxed on his crossed leg. Instinctively, as I looked at Miertsching, I felt that he was truthful. But how

could I get involved in something so risky and complex; how could I risk my life and the lives of others in the organization, just based on my instinct? I searched quickly for an answer.

“But Mr. Miertsching,” I told him politely but firmly, conscious of keeping my voice steady, “I do not belong to the Underground or know anybody who does. I work at a German *Baustelle* and I would never have anything to do with an illegal resistance organization.” I threw in a few more denials for good measure, but he was not dissuaded.

“I expected you to say that,” he said. “But I’m determined. I want to join the Underground and help to bring this shitty war to an end. I was never a party to it and I never believed in this crazy adventure. I need your help, Zenon.”

I concentrated on remaining calm, insisting that I had no contacts. He was equally composed, insisting that I find one.

The same evening I had arranged to meet Roman. Still unnerved by the visit by Miertsching, I eagerly told him about the conversation. We wondered how sincere Miertsching was and what might have motivated him to make such a risky request; whether it was simply a case of him switching sides as the war neared a victory for the Allies. Roman’s first reaction, like mine, was negative.

“What if he’s a plant?” Roman questioned, “What if the whole thing is a set-up?”

We certainly did not want to get caught in some kind of trap. To lose our lives, lives we had so laboriously and carefully reclaimed, at this late stage of the war was unthinkable. We knew that the Russian front was only forty to fifty miles from Warsaw; that the end of the war was near. But then, we thought, maybe he has something to offer that will help our fight? Maybe he has information that might be of special value, or

could provide weapons that were always critically needed. In the end, Roman left it more or less up to me to decide what to do; it was, after all, my life that was primarily on the line. I went home distraught and confused: Why was this happening now? Why had he picked me?

My tendency to foolishly disregard risks and dangers prevailed. Combined with my desire to do some good “for the cause,” I hoped that the Underground movement might be able to benefit from his help regardless of his sincerity or motives. I decided to cautiously continue my conversation with Miertsching, assuming him to be a shrewd opportunist aware that the Germans were on the verge of defeat.

Two days later, when Miertsching showed up again, realizing that I might be signing my own death warrant, I told him that I knew somebody who knew somebody who knew somebody, adding that what they said the Underground needed most was weapons, especially automatic weapons, such as machine guns. I told him that my contact knew nothing about him and that, in my opinion, this entire undertaking was much too risky. I waited for his reaction, for some indication as to my fate. To my dismay, he did not react or respond except to say that he would be back. The next day, when he did not return, I agonized over my decision to trust him, expecting any moment my arrest by the Gestapo. To my relief, he returned the following day, asking for a list of weapons the Underground needed.

In the meantime, the situation was changing rapidly. Roman was nowhere to be found. The Russian front was now so close that at night, when normally silence engulfed the city, the rattling of machine guns and periodic fire from heavy artillery could be heard. In Warsaw, there were persistent rumors that a major action by the Polish

Underground was expected to take place, in anticipation of the imminent entrance of the Russian Army into Warsaw. The Poles had no desire for their capital to be liberated by the Russians.

The *Baustelle* was ordered to close and Miertsching and all the other German employees were commanded to start preparing for transfer to one of WIFO's branches in Liebau, near Vienna. On my last day of work, I had noticed the company's military bicycle that has been assigned to me for work purposes leaning against a wall. I looked around me and, seeing the area was deserted, quickly jumped on the bike and headed away from the *Baustelle*. My satisfaction at my successful coup was intensified by my knowledge that the *Baustelle* personnel were scheduled to depart the following day, so my chances of being caught and punished for the theft of the bike, a serious offence, were slim. As I turned the corner, I heard my name called and was alarmed to see Miertsching in the company of two other high officials of the WIFO. I had been caught. In time of war and especially in the frontline zone, this was considered sabotage and I knew that I could be shot for this—something that I had stopped to consider before. I sat on the roadside as the three men discussed my fate, lamenting my rash foolishness. After some time it was clear that Miertsching had persuaded the others not to make an issue about the incident. To me, this meant either that he was serious about his desire to help the Underground, or that he was worried about me revealing our conversations to his associates. In any event, they merely pointed out the gravity of my misdeed and ordered me to immediately return the bike to the *Baustelle*.

I did not follow their instructions, however. As I watched the three men disappear down the road, I knew that I couldn't give back the stolen bike. Even more frightening to

me than disobeying these officials was returning to the *Baustelle* to admit the theft. Doing so might mean death. Instead, I waited impatiently at the roadside for the return of Miertsching and his companions. When they reappeared I waved for them to stop, apologized for my conduct, and pleaded with them to let me keep the bike. In return, I offered them one kilogram of tobacco—a scarce commodity at that time—that I have quickly purchased on the black market while waiting for the officials to return. They consulted briefly and, in the end, agreed to the deal. Since they all were ready to pack up and leave Poland, it was easier to add a kilogram of tobacco to their luggage than a bicycle. I suspected, however, that Miertsching again had something to do with their decision.

Once more, I felt the potentially disastrous consequences of my foolish and careless actions. Once more luck and fortuitous circumstances were with me. And once more, my life had been spared.

Chapter 15: MISSION TO LODZ GHETTO

My everyday underground activities were limited to Warsaw and its suburbs; only occasionally an operation took me outside the city, but then only for a day or two. But there were two trips I undertook outside of Warsaw that were longer, lasting one week each, more dangerous, more daring, and more complex. These were trips to my hometown of Lodz. The main aim of the first trip was to contact my family whereas the second trip was on behalf of the ZOB, finding a channel to some Jewish community activists in the Lodz Ghetto. The ZOB wanted the remaining Jews of Lodz to resist any deportation and to take an armed stand, if at all possible.

I yearned to help my parents and my sister who had been confined in the ghetto for the last four years. I had had no contact with them for the last three years and I did not know what had happened to them. I did not know if they were still there, or if they were even alive. The ZOB wanted to establish a channel of communication with the ghetto and possibly a conduit for delivery of money and weapons. All we knew at the time was that the ghetto still existed, that it was large, overcrowded, isolated, and sealed. Because it was now part of the Third Reich, it was particularly inaccessible; with respect to occupied Poland, it was like a foreign country.

The Lodz Ghetto was established in February, 1940 and remained in existence until late summer, 1944. It was first set up for the indigenous Jews of Lodz (approximately 200,000) but then became a gathering place for those from surrounding villages and cities, and, finally, also for foreign Jews from Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, France, and other places. Typically, ghettos were just places of

confinement. This ghetto, however, was organized to resemble a well-coordinated, productive, and profit-oriented enclave.

A powerful Jewish Council (*Judenrat*) and Jewish Service Police (*Ordnungsdienst*) were put in place and a complete civic infrastructure was established. At the head of the *Judenrat*, the Germans had placed a prewar community leader, Chaim Mordechai Rumkowski. Within months, the ghetto became a huge work camp for the German war machine. Manufacturing workshops were established and new machinery was brought in; experts were sought out from among the inmates or new ones were trained. The ghetto also attained, under Rumkowski's reign, a degree of autonomy and self-rule that was unknown in any other ghetto or camp. Apart from basic facilities, such as hospitals and utility services, this ghetto also had its own courts, a prison, an orphanage, and a sanatorium. In contrast to other ghettos, there were schools through the high school level and a variety of cultural activities, such as concerts, were allowed. However, in addition to the useful institutions and functions, others were established that were of questionable substance and purpose. For example, the ghetto authority had a post office and printed postage stamps with Rumkowski's image, although during the last two or three years, the inhabitants were not able to send or receive mail. Banknotes in marks (nicknamed "Rumkies"), bearing the Star of David and Rumkowski's signature, were issued. They were used as barter money inside the ghetto but carried no value elsewhere. There was also a streetcar department, even though there were no streetcars in the ghetto. Two tramlines from the outside did pass through the ghetto but without stopping. The ghetto's only motor vehicle was a fire truck. I learned about the on-goings in the Lodz

ghetto early on, from my parents' letters and, later, from people who escaped the ghetto and came to Tomaszow.

Rumkowski organized the ghetto into what appeared to be a Jewish mini-state where he was an absolute ruler. Under the motto "Productive work in exchange for survival," he created a slave labor camp dedicated to the support of the German war machine. Rumkowski believed that under the rules imposed by the German authorities this was the only way to save the ghetto, its inmates, and himself.

As the Jews were confined to the northern, mostly poor, section of the city, the area became greatly over-populated. Of the Poles living in Lodz, many were either deported to the occupied Polish territories or forced to relocate to the city suburbs. Local ethnic Germans, together with newly arrived Third Reich Germans, took over the homes and apartments in the central, better parts of town; for the most part, houses left by the Jews.

Soon after the Germans conquered Poland in 1939, they separated the northwestern part of it—including the city of Lodz—and annexed it to the Third Reich, calling it Warthegau and Danzig-West Prussia. They gave all the cities German names, with Lodz becoming Litzmannstadt. The rest of occupied Poland was designated as General Government (GG). The GG-Germany border was guarded and controlled like any international border, and required special documents for entry or exit.

My two trips to Lodz, a mere seventy kilometers from Warsaw, were now considered international trips; they required a passport (in my case the ID card) and a visa-like document for border crossings. Traveling across these new borders also presented unknown dangers, because few Poles, if any, ever ventured to travel on their

own volition to Germany. Mostly, they crossed the border under supervision as forced laborers for Germany's fields and factories, as smugglers, or on their way to a Nazi concentration camp.

Despite my keen awareness that the Germans were committed to the total destruction of the Jewish people, I nurtured the hope that the Lodz Ghetto would prove an exception, that perhaps it would survive the war and, with it, my family. This ghetto, I thought to myself, with its own money, postage stamps, and Jewish-guarded prison is such an anomaly, it's so different, that maybe it will survive. I wondered often what I might do to help my parents and my sister—how I could contact them, how I could help them to escape, or, at least, advise them to avoid being deported. I also wanted to let them know that I was alive and safe. Although I knew that it was an extremely risky undertaking and that it had a low probability of yielding results, I decided to go to Lodz.

The first order of business was obtaining travel documents. Because I knew some German, I had made several acquaintances among the German employees of the company, including secretaries and some officials. I had also acquired a certain status within the WIFO organization; Germans usually came to me with their electrical problems to translate the task to the other electricians. Similarly, my Polish co-workers came to me to translate their problems and present them to the Germans. Some Germans used me as a translator; one used to bring to me love letters from his Polish girlfriend.

In general, at the *Baustelle*, the Germans were proper and businesslike toward the Polish workers; they needed us as much as we needed them. Some were always friendly, others became noticeably friendlier starting in early 1944, when the Germans were suffering one defeat after another and were forced to withdraw on all fronts. I often

exchanged a few words with these Germans whenever our paths crossed, usually on the way to and from the cafeteria or at lunchtime.

Mrs. Follman, a secretary to one of the vice presidents, was particularly nice. She always had a warm expression and greeted people with a smile. A woman in her thirties from Breslau, Mrs. Follman had a ten-year-old son living with her. Although she was very Aryan looking, her son was not. Rumors were spread that Mrs. Follman had been married to a Jew, that they had been forcibly separated or divorced as demanded by the Nuremberg laws, and that her husband had been deported to the Warsaw Ghetto where he perished. It was also rumored that, at the same time, her own father was serving in a police battalion that had participated in the fight against the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

I approached Mrs. Follman for help, confiding in her that I had a fiancée in Lodz and wanted to visit her, but that I needed the necessary travel documents. She was very sympathetic to the idea and promised to intervene on my behalf with the boss, the president of WIFO, Mr. Stuepnagel. To my delight, she succeeded. In March, 1944, I obtained an official WIFO document stating that I was traveling to Litzmannstadt on company business (*dienstlich*) and requesting all German authorities to facilitate my travel and render assistance, if needed. Specifically, it stated that I be provided with accommodations and the Reich's ration cards. This document, in turn, allowed me to obtain the second necessary pass: the border crossing visa (*Durchlassschein*). Within days of receiving the documents, and with the hope that I would soon see my family again, I made my first exploratory trip to Lodz.

The morning train I boarded was bound for Berlin and was packed with Germans: civilians and military on home leave, some women with children, most likely returning home after visiting their husbands and fathers. For all I knew, some may have been concentration camp officials or guards. Those in uniforms looked alike. Chattering and laughing, they paid little attention to a Pole in their midst. To avoid being included in their conversations, and to make it clear that I was not one of them, I held my Polish newspaper in front of me. Forever conscious of who I really was and the irony of the situation, I was bitterly aware that I might be sitting next to the murderers of my own family and friends. I felt disgusted but relatively secure. Who would look for a Jew in the midst of a group of happy Nazis?

My documents were foolproof, the border controller accepted them without even looking at me and, more and more, I felt completely at ease. But, as I arrived in the city itself, my mood changed. A constant, dull pain accompanied my every move. The city looked so different from what I remembered, sad and lifeless. The streets were half empty and the few passersby walked in grim silence. Lodz was never a pretty city but now it was ugly and ghostly. I registered in the hotel assigned to me by the Military Travel Aid kiosk at the Lodz Kaliska railroad station and immediately went for a walk in the direction of the ghetto. Ferocious looking German police guards, in full military gear, prevented anyone coming too close to the barbed wire or the entrance gate, their carbines constantly at the ready.

Two tramlines ran through the ghetto: one on Nowomiejska-Zgierska Streets and one through Franciszkanska-Brzezinska Streets. The doors of all trams, at all times, were locked, however, while passing through the ghetto. German conductors drove them

through without stopping. I traveled on both lines—up and down, up and down—for hours. It was sheer luck that no one noticed my repeated aimless traveling or my intense stares at the people in the ghetto.

Inside the ghetto, masses of emaciated, distraught, shabbily dressed people were everywhere. The sight made my heart ache. I searched eagerly for my family, friends, or neighbors but I couldn't see my parents or my sister, or anyone else I knew. I felt so close to them and yet so far away; helplessness weighed on me like a heavy burden. My only hope for contact was to send them a sign that I was alive. Back in my hotel room, I wrote several letters to my parents, folded them up, and placed them inside little rolls and matchboxes. Then, back on the trams speeding through the ghetto, I bent down, pretending to tighten my shoelaces, opened a cover over the tram's step, and threw out a roll or a matchbox. I did this only once or twice during each tram ride, so as not to attract attention, making several trips. With each letter there was also a cover note addressed to the finder of the roll or matchbox, asking them to deliver the letter to my parents, at Brzezinska Str. 10. But I had no way of knowing whether any of my notes would be delivered.

My permits were soon to expire and I began to get ready for my return trip. But I had one last deed before returning to Warsaw. There was an epidemic of typhus at the Blizyn camp and Tetka, Ignac's girlfriend, was already ill. Anti-typhus vaccines were presumed to be effective and, so, were very much in demand and almost impossible to find. I eventually found and bought them in a German pharmacy and immediately took a

train to Blizyn to deliver them through Ignac's Polish contact man, Mr. Wrona. It was a short visit and the Pole promised to make the delivery.⁹

After the meeting, I walked across the railroad tracks and down the narrow country road towards the Blizyn concentration camp, somehow, drawn to do it.

I do not know and do not understand why I wanted to go to the place where people might recognize me, a place surrounded by SS men. It was a dangerous action, not only for me but for others, including Mr. Wrona, and totally without purpose. Luckily, halfway there, I ran into a column of camp inmates accompanied by a Jewish policeman whom I knew, Jurek Rosenberg. It was the Loading Commando, the one from which Ignac and Stasiek broke away when they escaped to come to Warsaw. Recognizing me, Jurek urgently signaled that I should go no further, that I should—that I must—go back. Heeding his advice, I turned around and took the next train for Warsaw.

* * *

My second trip to Lodz, in July, 1944 was a mission that I instigated and carried out for the ZOB. The goal was to establish a contact inside the ghetto, and to set in motion the transfer of money and, perhaps, weapons for resistance. We wanted, at the very least, to find a means to provide material help to the suffering ghetto population. These goals were even loftier and more ambitious than those set for the first trip but with equally low probability for success. To the best of my or Krysia's knowledge, the ZOB had no

⁹ Mr. Wrona was supposed to deliver the vaccines by throwing the package over the barbed wire fence at night to his confidant inside the camp. Whether he did it or not or whether the right man received it or not, I never knew. I know only that Tetka never received them and died shortly afterwards.

contacts or anchors there at the time which compounded the problem, but we felt it was our duty to try.

I presented my plan to Krysia and she passed it on to her superiors. Approval came within days in the form of two, fifty-dollar banknotes (equivalent to about 20,000 zlotys) for the trip. With that in hand, I started on travel plans: obtaining the required documents and searching for possible contacts. Getting a set of travel documents from WIFO was easier this time; after all, they already knew that I had a fiancée in Lodz, and, once again, Mrs. Follman was helpful. Receiving the official visa was also routine.

A more difficult problem was to find a trustworthy contact in Lodz. I needed local Lodz residents who were willing to help, prepared to take the risk, and, hopefully, who already had an established contact inside the ghetto. I also needed a safe place to stay. All these were tough orders. Here, as elsewhere, any activity related to contacting or assisting those in the ghetto, was punishable by death.

I decided to use my other Underground connections to help me in my mission. Juggling my membership in the three opposing organizations was nerve-racking and burdensome but, luckily, I never fully understood the situation I created for myself. I was totally oblivious to the dangers and the potentially fatal consequences of it. Only intuitively I knew that asking for help from *Miecz i Plug*, was out of the question. The revelation that the purpose of my trip had anything to do with a ghetto would immediately betray my identity and any mention to *Miecz i Plug* that I was involved in the two other organizations would be dangerous beyond description. I could have been killed as a traitor or *Agent Provocateur* or both.

I settled on the other Underground organization, *Gwardia Ludowa*, and approached Roman, who knew that I had parents in Lodz and understood my desire to help them. Regarding the other, broader, objective of the trip—establishing a channel to the Lodz ghetto—I left him in the dark. I could not reveal the ZOB involvement. If Roman knew that I needed the contact for a mission sponsored by the ZOB, or that I even belonged to that organization, he would provide no help. Moreover, I would be dismissed me from the organization without hesitation.

In the belief that I was only traveling to Lodz to find my family, Roman readily agreed to help. As he held a high position in *Gwardia Ludowa*, and his superior, Loga Sowinski, knew who I was and was aware of my services, when Roman requested a contact in Lodz for me, Loga granted it as a personal favor. I was given a name, an address, and a password: “Wlodek sent me.” So, equipped with documents from WIFO, money from the ZOB, and a contact from *Gwardia Ludowa*, I took off.

There was a huge crowd on the train and I had to stand for the entire journey. As the Russian armies pushed ever closer to the Reich’s territory, a massive stream of refugees moved westward. The crowd was mixed. This time there were not only Germans on the move but Latvians, Estonians, Ukrainians, and White Russians. Some were fleeing to the West because they were German collaborators, others were simply fearful of falling under Communist rule again. Crossing the border was no problem——because the train was so packed, there was simply no room for the border controller to pass through the car. After a two-hour-long journey, I arrived at Lodz Kaliska station, where, as expected, there were no hotels available. I, once again, asked for assistance at the German Travel Aid kiosk, an outfit that served military personnel. With my documents indicating

I was traveling on official business, they tried to help but all they could offer was a bed in a large room of a hostel hotel, with three others in the room. It crossed my mind that the roommates could be Gestapo agents spying on me. Perhaps I was being followed? When I arrived at the hostel, however, I soon found that my roommates were three *Hitlerjugend* boys. It was bad enough I had to look at swastika-marked uniforms everywhere I turned, but to have to spend several nights with them in the same room was too much.

“Lousy luck,” I thought to myself. But I had no choice. The encounter ended without incident, except that in my absence they rummaged through my suitcase.

Early the next morning, I set out to locate my contact people. I was apprehensive, acutely aware of the magnitude of my assignment. Never during my yearlong stay on the Polish side had I volunteered or admitted to anyone that I was Jewish. But this was exactly what I was about to do now. I was to divulge my secret to strangers to whom I had been sent by Loga and Roman. I knew that they all were members of the Underground, and assumed that they were patriotic and trustworthy. But it was also possible that they were patriotic and anti-Semitic. That was not an uncommon occurrence at all. I was worried but there was no turning back.

I arrived at the given address, a small apartment house in the working-class suburb of Chojny, a manufacturing sector. A woman answered the door, and I gave her the password. In a matter-of-fact manner, as though I were a neighbor who had come to borrow a cup of sugar, she muttered, “Come in.” Inside, there were two other women in a typical workers’ apartment: two rooms and a kitchen with beds everywhere. I waited about six hours for the two brothers, the key members of the cell, to come home from work. During that time we ate a modest lunch, not saying much. We did not even

introduce ourselves. Did they have other visitors like me, I wondered? Did they expect my arrival? Or were they sizing me up, trying to figure out what kind of dangerous adventure I was on? In the end, the women never asked why I came and I never told them.

When the men finally arrived, I told them why I was there and what I hoped to accomplish. They listened attentively, but, like the women, said little. When I finished, one of them responded curtly:

“Tomorrow, we will take time off from work to look for contacts for you.”

No questions were asked about who I was, what was so special about the people called Neumark in the ghetto, or why I wanted to get them out. The word “Jew” was never mentioned but it must have been obvious to them that I was one. But, somehow, my fears were allayed and I felt, instinctively, that I could trust them.

I spent the night there and the next morning one of them made the rounds with me. We visited a tram conductor who occasionally had the job of operating one of the trams traveling through the ghetto; we went to a food supply deliveryman who had a permit to enter the ghetto; we talked to a bureaucrat with undefined connections. They were all sympathetic with my mission, they all emphasized how difficult my task would be, and they all promised to help. But they did not deliver. One of them did come back with the information that my family was fine and that my sister was working in a communal kitchen.¹⁰ Others pleaded for more time.

With these first few contacts not panning out, I tried an alternate plan, which was to find my Aunt Stenia, who lived in Lodz but not in the ghetto. Stenia was the only

¹⁰ I learned later that the information regarding my sister was incorrect. Rena ran a lending library in her home, a perfect occupation for her as she had always loved books.

Christian in my family, married to my mother's brother Jozef. From the beginning of the war she helped her husband and, indirectly, my parents. The problem was that I could not remember her maiden name or her address. I knew her brother-in-law, Franek, but, again, I did not know his last name or address.

I made one last attempt in the search for a contact by visiting a well-known Italian ice-cream parlor (*Chłodnia Włoska*) on Piotrkowska Street; it was established there by an Italian family, the Serrafinis, many years before the war. Normally, I would not have exposed myself to an unknown merchant or a casual acquaintance but I was desperate. Moreover, Mr. Serrafini was not a complete stranger, as my father had known him for many years and had numerous business dealings with him. Whenever my sister and I stopped by for ice cream—our favorite was the multi-flavored *cassata* in a champagne glass shaped metal container—Mr. Serrafini would never let us pay.

I walked in and asked the young dark-haired man behind the counter if I could speak with the owner.

"I'm the owner," he told me, and, probably seeing my confused expression, explained that he was Mr. Serrafini's son and had taken over the business.

Although I did not know the son, I risked confiding in him. I asked to talk with him in private, and he led me to the back room. I told him directly that I needed help in contacting the Neumarks in the ghetto, that I needed a contact in any shape or form, at any cost, and that I needed one now, as my stay was coming to an end. He acknowledged that he knew my father and said that he would like to help, but that he knew of no way. There was no discussion why I wanted to help them now, why I felt so desperate—that was understood. Before I left, he insisted that I have a *cassata* ice cream. Later, when we

said good-bye, I had the same despondent feelings I remembered experiencing in the camp: hopelessness and helplessness.

Two days before my scheduled departure from Lodz, I made one of my routine trips through the ghetto on a tram going down Brzezinska Street, dispatching the usual letters in a roll or a matchbox. As I looked up, I saw a familiar face sitting right across from me. I was sure that I knew the man but, at first, could not place him. As discreetly as possible, I continued to stare at him, willing myself to remember his name. He was of medium stature, slim, with a rather dark complexion, and totally bald. When he got off the tram a few stops later, I decided to follow him. As I traced his footsteps, it suddenly dawned on me who he was: a teacher from my Gymnasium, Schwajcera. Although the school was Jewish he, one of two non-Jewish teachers there, was an ethnic Ukrainian. He taught handicrafts while the other one taught gymnastics and pre-military training.

Conscious that someone was following him, he soon stopped and turned. I quickly approached him and told him that I knew of him, that he had been a teacher in the Schwajcera School; Breathlessly, I explained that a friend of mine had been a student in that school. I could not tell him that I myself was from that school, because that would have revealed I was Jewish. To my great surprise, he vehemently denied he was that teacher and ordered me to stop following him. I continued to pursue him, nevertheless, and he stopped again. Angrily, he turned on me, and demanded, “Why are you following me? What do you want from me?”

Hesitating slightly, and with a lot of trepidation at the risk I was taking, I told him, “I need to contact the ghetto Elders and one of the families in the ghetto. I was wondering if you could help.”

Without admitting who he was or agreeing to help, he thought for a minute and then said that he would meet me again. He proposed that we meet the next day, at noon, at the corner of Pomorska and Kilinskiego Streets, close to where Schwajcera Gymnasium used to be and only two blocks away from the ghetto's wall.

That night, I did not sleep a wink, tormented by images of uniformed Gestapo and SS men descending from all directions as I stood alone on that corner. Torture, reprisal against my family, and finally death, filled my thoughts. But the dye was cast and there was no going back. I was determined to stay with the plan.

Now and then I forced the pictures out of my mind and asked myself: What if he can help? What if he will help? What is the downside of meeting with him? My mind would not stop swirling. I wished all night that I could turn the clock forward to noon.

I arrived early for the meeting the next day and waited, observing from a distance. He arrived on time but I waited a few more moments to make sure he was alone. Satisfied that no one else was around, I approached him. I didn't know if by then he had recognized me as his former student, but he was friendly and agreed to help, adding that he had some leads for me. The tension from the night before dissolved into a flood of relief and elation and, again, I had some hope that I might find my family and help the ZOB.

My ex-teacher took me to an apartment about three blocks away where we met two middle-aged sisters. He mumbled something about the sisters working outside the law—perhaps meaning in the Underground—and that one of them had only recently been released from jail.¹¹ They gave me their full names, which I no longer remember; I

¹¹ I learned later that she was a professional nurse and was jailed for performing an illegal abortion.

introduced myself only as Zenon. The women were friendly and listened attentively, even sympathetically. For my part, I spilled it all out—that people in Warsaw wanted to help individuals, groups, even the entire ghetto and that I had a personal interest in saving one specific family. I revealed that money was available to pay for the help, and that we had repeatedly failed to find secure channels into the ghetto. Again, I was told how difficult it would be. But I also heard about possible contacts, through others, that they had.

“We need time, a few days, perhaps even a few weeks,” they insisted. But for me, time was rapidly running out. It was July 1944, the frontline was no more than one hundred miles away and my permit was about to expire.

The next morning—the day of my departure—I visited the ladies again. Several possibilities were mentioned, but nothing specific yet. There was one hopeful note, though. A lady friend of theirs, whose husband was in the ghetto, was supposed to visit them the next day. But I could not wait. My permit was expiring and I had to hurry back. Tired, discouraged, and emotionally drained, I left for Warsaw in the early afternoon without leaving either my last name or my address.

At the station, I went to board the train, my mind preoccupied with my visit and my return to Warsaw. Suddenly, the German railroad police stopped me. Looking around, I realized that I was the only passenger whom they stopped and I had no idea why. With a feeling of dread, I did my best to appear unconcerned and casual. They took me to a small room and stripped me to my underwear, searching every piece of clothing and examining every piece of paper they found. I had no idea what they were searching for. Weapons? Smuggled diamonds? I still had the two fifty-dollar banknotes I was carrying back to Warsaw well hidden in a tube of toothpaste. My main worry was how I should

answer if they asked me what kind of business trip I was on or who I had contacted in Lodz. I had no good answers that could have been verified. But they did not ask, and, after a thorough search of all my belongings, eventually they let me go. In the meantime, the train waited for me and we finally left the station almost an hour late.

Although traumatized, once safely settled in my seat I had a moment of satisfaction: single-handedly I managed to wreak havoc on the railroad schedule of the Third Reich!

The evening of the day I departed for Warsaw, the two sisters had a visitor. It was their lady friend, who was first on their list of people with contacts within the ghetto. The two sisters related to their guest the events of the preceding two days: they told her about the visit by their friend, the Ukrainian teacher with false papers; the visit from a young man from Warsaw on an urgent mission to contact the ghetto; and the young man's desperate plea for help for one particular family. Then they described me. At that point the lady friend almost fainted.

"But that was Zenek, my nephew! Where is he? How can I contact him?" she cried, incredulously. It was too much of a coincidence to believe. The lady friend was my Aunt Stenia.¹² If only I had found Stenia on my first visit to Lodz; if only my meeting with the two sisters had happened just a couple of days earlier. No one can know what turn my mission might have taken if these things had happened.

¹² It was from my Aunt Stenia that I later found out that the Ukrainian was indeed my former teacher at Schwajcera. When we met, he was using false ID papers, just as I was, because the Nazis were persecuting him for not signing a pro-Nazi Ukrainian list and because he too was a member of the Polish Underground. She also told me that all three, my former teacher and the two sisters, knew that I was a Jew and that they genuinely wanted to help me.

On my trip to Poland in the summer of 1990, I spent considerable time trying to find my ex-teacher. But I did not succeed. I did not find a single old classmate or teacher from the Gymnasium; the school itself was now a *Technicum* and I was told that all the records from the Gymnasium period had been shipped to the school district administrator. There, I was told that due to a shortage of space, all records had been transferred to an unknown location. Even more recently, I tried to find him or his family, again unsuccessfully, through a Ukrainian club and an ex-Underground members circle. I would have liked to thank him from the bottom of my heart for trying to help me and to thank him for being a decent man. This was another of my life's regrets.

Although I had failed in my mission to the Lodz Ghetto, I still had faith that, by some miracle, my family would survive this war. The Russian front line was moving closer and closer and the fate of Germany was a foregone conclusion. The Nazi armies were in retreat on all fronts. Maybe the few remaining ghettos would be spared, not so much due to a change of heart or change in the German's plans or design, but by force of circumstance: by a breakdown of order; because of the avalanche of refugees moving westward; or by the need to throw all available manpower—including the SS, police, and Gestapo who were running the ghettos and camps—into reinforcing the frontlines. I hoped and prayed.

The Lodz ghetto lasted longer than any other large ghetto in Eastern Europe. However, in the end, the Lodz ghetto, its people, and Rumkowski, shared the same fate as all the other ghettos—destruction.

Chapter 16: THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

In July, the pace of life in Warsaw accelerated. Tensions and anxieties escalated. The number of German military personnel in the streets doubled and military equipment was moving in both directions, eastward towards the front and westward towards the Reich. The Nazis constructed bunker-like entrances to major buildings occupied by the Germans. In front, the guards wore full military gear, but now the kit seemed heavier than usual, the guards looked more ferocious, and there were more of them. German civilians at the *Baustelle* and elsewhere were packing to go westward.

The Polish Underground was conspicuously quiet, yet one could sense in the air that something was brewing. It was the calm before the storm. Radio Moscow blared repeated appeals for the populations in all occupied lands to rise in revolt against the oppressor. Radio “*Swit*” (dawn), the official voice of the *Delegatura* in Warsaw (the representation of the Polish government-in-exile) appealed to the Polish people not to lose hope, to endure a little longer, that the hour of liberation and revenge was drawing near. In actuality, Radio *Swit* was located in the vicinity of London and only pretended to broadcast from Warsaw to mislead and frustrate the Germans. The Warsaw equipment consisted of a receiver and re-broadcast stations. This equipment, as well as some transmitters, was moved frequently, sometimes hourly, to avoid being captured by the Germans.

One Saturday, on the corner of Grochowska Street and Szembeka Square, at ten o’clock in the morning, a few people gathered under a large speaker hanging from a street lamppost, to listen to a broadcast of German propaganda. Such loudspeakers were

distributed throughout Warsaw; it was the source of our daily news—in addition to the daily *Kurier Warszawski*—as ownership of radios was prohibited. All of a sudden, the regular broadcast was interrupted and a few seconds later a new station came on, a clandestine Polish station playing the Polish national anthem, “Poland is not yet lost.” (*Jeszcze Polska nie Zginela*). The few became a crowd, all standing to attention with their hats or hands over their hearts. Tears streamed down people’s faces, lips moved in unison with the words of the broadcast. I was one of the crowd and the event moved me every bit as much as it moved the others. I, too, felt my face wet with tears and as much a proud Pole as any Catholic Pole.

The atmosphere in the city was getting more on edge each day. We, the remaining Jews, felt optimistic that the end was near, but our hopes were tempered, not only by the many reversals and disappointments of the past, but also by the stark, sad reality we knew, subconsciously, we would have to face in the future: the tragedy that had befallen our people. We all felt ambivalence, a fervent desire to fight and defeat our bitter enemy, yet also a fear of confronting the destroyed world of yesterday and the emptiness of today. Even if we did not know it, we sensed it. Our thoughts kept returning to those dear to us, far away and near by.

In the last days of July, I saw only Krysia, Marysia, and Maciej. My friends Ignac, Stasiek, and Ludwik were in Riga, and Wladek had joined the partisans in the woods; his prime task was to bring wounded partisans to Warsaw’s Underground hospitals. Communications with Roman, as well as with a few other friends, fell silent. Krysia, too, lost contact with her superiors and, thus, my own Underground activities ceased. Even my *Baustelle* co-workers, the electricians, dispersed. I went to work only

now and then, spending more time at home, socializing a bit with my neighbors, reading books, and attending all church functions regularly. Father Sztuka, the priest from the local parish church on Szembeka Square, which I had been attending now for almost a year, was someone I knew personally. I had made his acquaintance by chance through his seventeen-year-old niece, Zosia who was a friend of my landlords on Osowska Street, and a frequent visitor to their home. On occasion, we flirted a bit. That year, for Easter, my landlords gave a holiday party with most of the celebration, like the Easter dinner, taking place in my room, the biggest in the house. There were several guests at the party, including Zosia. Besides the traditional food and egg-hunt, there was a large flow of vodka—which was rather unusual for wartime. Soon, not many guests could stand on their own feet, much less walk on them, to go home. With the police curfew hovering over us, about ten people remained in my room, sleeping on the two available beds. In the morning, I was designated to accompany Zosia to the parish house, partly for company but mostly to provide all the necessary explanations about where she had spent the night. That's when I first met Father Sztuka, a round, short, stocky man, jovial and pleasant, of peasant origin. He invited me to join them for breakfast, which turned out to be the most sumptuous one that I had had in years. It was not difficult to figure out where Father Sztuka's roundness came from. After breakfast, we engaged in small talk. I don't remember the topics of our conversation, but I know that neither Jews, nor religion, nor the war itself were mentioned.

In the last few weeks before the Warsaw Uprising, I stopped my visits to the Spoczynski house. During my last visit, Mrs. Spoczynski informed me of a big scare I had caused them. Very early one morning, around 3:30, the Gestapo came to arrest me.

She told them that I had moved out several months ago and that they have not heard from me since. They asked several questions as to my current whereabouts, new address, place of work, relatives, and so on, but since she did not have any answers, they left. I had no clue as to what they were after—it could have concerned my Underground activities, or someone might have denounced me as a Jew in hiding—but I was not about to stay to find out. I left hurriedly, never to return. From then on, Solec 46, which had provided an anchor of safety for me and quite a few others, and which had always filled me with deep affection for the Spoczynskis, became off-limits.

During the last days of July the traffic in and around Warsaw became unusually heavy. It contained not only German military and civilians, but also the Polish population at large. Some Poles wanted to avoid the frontline and the expected battle for Warsaw. Some, afraid that the food supply to the city would be cut off, headed for the countryside. Some sought safety by joining relatives in other towns. Still others crowded into the city because they could not return to their homes that were now on the other side of the front line, in the area already liberated or occupied—depending on one's point of view—by the Russians.

As August approached, new front-page news swamped the city: the German armies were suffering defeat after defeat on all fronts. The Russian army east of Warsaw was poised for further advances. Everyone expected them to march into Warsaw any day. German tanks, armored vehicles, heavy artillery, and grim German troops headed westward. In Grochow, the front was no more than seven to ten miles away, near

Rembertow. During the night, the thunderous sound of artillery was interrupted only by the crackling of machine-gun fire.

Attacks by the Polish Underground against the Germans increased in frequency and boldness. There were daily assaults on German officers and Nazi agents. Railroad tracks were blown up, sabotage was rampant, and retaliation by the Nazis was not long in coming. In this chaos, the Germans executed Polish hostages for the smallest acts of sabotage or resistance. But we all knew that the hour of vindication was near. The Polish Underground, especially the largest of the various groups, the *Armja Krajowa*, subordinated to the *Delegatura*, was mobilizing fighting units for a general uprising against the despised German occupiers.

We were awaiting the coming storm. The only question was when.

Chapter 17: WARSAW ABLAZE

Finally, at five o'clock in the afternoon, on August 1, 1944, what everyone was expecting happened.

I was in Warsaw, visiting with Marysia and running some errands, when I heard the distant wail of sirens followed by cracks of gunfire coming from all directions. On the streets, tremendous anxiety showed on the faces of the crowds of people, as they hustled and hurried to reach their homes. I was trying to get back to my home in Grochow, on the eastern side of the Vistula River but it was impossible to find a tramway—some of the streetcars had been requisitioned for use as barricades, other were so overcrowded that no one could go on, so I started on foot. I crossed the Poniatowski Bridge and reached the end of Paderewski Park when I saw a group of fifteen to twenty young Underground fighters moving in my direction, in single file, from a building across the street. They wore light Polish military hats, civilian clothing with white and red armbands, and carried carbines. Within minutes, they crossed the street and took up positions behind the park's wall, pointing their guns at German cars moving eastward. The cars accelerated, not stopping to engage in a fight. At that moment, without a moment's hesitation, I rushed over to the group's leader, a lieutenant, and declared: "I want to join you. I am a member of the Underground, the *Miecz i Plug*. Please, I want to join the fight against the Nazis."

I was unceremoniously turned away with the explanation that they had no arms for me, no permission to accept volunteers, and that I should go home and wait till I was called. I was never called for two reasons: first of all, I had never been formally inducted into a combat unit of any of the three organizations with which I was working. Secondly,

Grochow had been occupied by the Germans from day one and, except for a few skirmishes like the one behind the Paderewski Park, no significant battles were fought there.

The Warsaw Uprising was ordered by the *Armja Krajowa*, the umbrella organization for the main underground groups. Smaller underground organizations, such as the *Armja Ludowa* and the *Miecz i Plug*, immediately joined the insurrection. The start of the Uprising was carefully timed—ahead of, but close to, the anticipated entrance into Warsaw by the Soviet army. That army was now close to the city’s outskirts and was expected to reach Warsaw in a few days. The Polish Command, although it did expect the Russian Army to help, wanted the Polish people themselves to liberate their capital. Sadly, this strategy turned out to be a major blunder and miscalculation by the *Armja Krajowa* Command. The Soviets did not come in to assist the Uprising, as anticipated and hoped for. They seem to have made a strategic decision not to intervene in the battle for Warsaw and, instead, halted their offensive and even retreated a few miles—thus enabling a part of the German forces facing the Russians to turn their might around and fight the Polish insurgents. The Russians also forbade Allied planes to land and refuel on their territories after making ammunition and other supply drops to the *Armja Krajowa*. Finally, in spite of pleas by the Polish Government-In-Exile and its prime minister, Mr. Mikolajczyk, they declined to provide their own supplies. Stalin had his own agenda: to prepare ground for a take-over of Poland by a pro-Communist, pro-Soviet government that was being established on the territories already occupied by the Red Army. We heard about this complex and tragic situation, in part, on clandestine radios; in part, we learned what had happened only after the war.

Why didn't the Russians help? After all, Poland was allied with Russia and part of the alliance against Germany? There were many explanations, interpretation of events as well as opinions. One explanation was that the Russians had not planned to advance into Warsaw at that time, that the troops were exhausted by their last offensive, that the supplies had to be replenished, and that the Uprising was not properly coordinated with the Soviets. Another opinion given was that the reason was political due to the stark antagonism between Russia and Poland, dating back centuries. Still another reason—a procedural reason—was offered to me many years later at a party in a friend's house, by a former Russian officer who happened to be at the very gates of Warsaw exactly at the time of the Warsaw uprising.¹³ He was there when the Poles gained control of almost the entire city. He was also there when the insurgents became low on food, water, and ammunition and—under constant, relentless bombardment—had to surrender. “Why in God's name didn't you come to our rescue?” I asked in a pained voice. “Didn't you see Warsaw being obliterated, bleeding to death?” Calmly but not convincingly, he tried to explain that they, on the front, had no orders to attack, no orders to move one inch forward.

He claimed the reason was simply that in the Russian army, in contrast to other armies, all requests for changes in plans and for new orders had to travel up the ladder, all the way to headquarters in Moscow and then back down again, and that these procedures were lengthy and slow. Thus, the orders to enter Warsaw came too late. Facts on the

¹³ The former Soviet Officer and I exchanged arguments in a long and animated discussion, all in Russian. In spite of disagreements, I was pleased with myself. I was pleasantly surprised and pleased at how quickly and conveniently the Russian language came back to me. I almost wanted to pat myself on the back. But it would have been prematurely because that feeling of contentment was quickly crushed. Before saying goodbye to each other, my Russian friend looked at me with a twinkle of satisfaction in his eyes and said “I never realized how much Polish I understand!”

ground confirmed that the Soviets were indeed slow in starting an offensive on this front but they did not explain the reason for it: they only occupied Grochow and Praga—where there was no fighting—by the 15th of September and did not move into Warsaw until January 17, 1945—five and a half months after the Uprising started.

During the first weeks of the Warsaw Uprising, Grochow was relatively quiet, even dull. But the calm was shattered one afternoon by a startling incident. In a local tavern, about two blocks from Szembeka Square, on the street running towards Antoninow, two Polish Blue policemen (*policja granatowa*) sat at the counter, having a few drinks. Suddenly, two young men, one carrying a rolled paper under his arm, walked in and addressed one of the policemen. “Are you such and such, born..., son of?” Upon confirming his identity, one of the young men opened the rolled-up paper and read from a script “By order of the High Court of the Republic of Poland... For crimes committed by you on...., you have been sentenced to death!” At that instant, the second man drew a pistol from his pocket and fired two shots. The policeman fell to the floor, dead. In less than three minutes, the two young men were gone.

I do not know the nature of this policeman’s crime, or what crimes were involved in similar incidents throughout Warsaw during the occupation. But I could not help thinking that had the Underground court been equally effective in persecuting the crimes of blackmailers and denunciators of the Jews, much pain and trauma would have been avoided and many Jewish lives would have been spared. The Jewish Underground sent such requests periodically to both the *Delegatura* in Warsaw and to the authorities of the Polish government in London, but to no avail. Our pleas, with very few exceptions, fell on deaf ears.

The weeks of idle waiting in Grochow were extremely difficult to take. The sounds of battles fought in Warsaw continued uninterrupted, day and night. Only the direction was shifting, from one district to another. Then there was the smell, a terrible smell, and worst of all, the sight of Warsaw burning. One hundred and eighty degrees of black, billowing smoke spread out against the sky, intertwined with columns of multicolored flames. In the midst of it was Warsaw's million plus population, with all of its women and children, old and sick people, and its national and cultural treasures. Warsaw was being systematically burned and leveled to the ground, destroyed, street by street, block by block. Those remaining Jews, who so laboriously and sometimes miraculously managed to escape, first the camps and then the perils of a life in hiding, now faced a new threat of annihilation. Among them were also those few who had escaped the inferno of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. They were now fighting—individually and in small, organized units together with the Poles—the common enemy all over again.

My aunts Marysia and Mania, cousin Marta, Maciej with his eight-year old daughter Yola, Kuba, Roman, Wladek and other friends were all trapped behind the ascending flames. The whole horizon was engulfed in a thick, black cloud of smoke, sending tons of soot all over the city and beyond. The shade of blackness varied; its height would sometimes shoot up or drop lower, but the extent and density of the smoke remained constant, day in, day out. Warsaw was ablaze and just like before, in the ghetto and in the camp, a feeling of total powerlessness overwhelmed all of us who lived across the Vistula.

On the afternoon of August 14, Kryisia came to my house on Kiprow Street, to celebrate my birthday. She brought a flask of vodka and I supplied some fruit and small

sugar cubes. But our mood was grim and it was not a happy celebration. We knew that it was a real possibility that the Uprising would end in defeat. We felt the noose tightening, that our very lives might be in danger and that we might be taken away any day now. We expected to be separated and perhaps never see each other again. Our work in the Underground that had been a source of purpose and satisfaction had already come to a halt. The contacts with those to whom we had provided subsidies were lost and our own means of support begun to vanish. Only one thing remained: a unique and incredibly strong bond between us.

Krysia was particularly worried because she had a sick mother and a fiancée in hiding. She was also short of funds. As a full-time, paid courier for the ZOB, her work had ended abruptly when the Uprising started and she had received only one month's pay in advance. For food we all had only provisions we managed to purchase in the first days of the Uprising. In the stores, food supplies disappeared quickly without replenishment. One evening I ventured out to the nearby Square, but all the stores were closed—and not only because it was evening. There was no merchandise to sell and the shelves were empty. Small groups of people, mostly women, were gathered on street corners, wondering in whispers what would happen next. Men did not dare walk around for fear of being taken away. As I turned to walk back to my home, my eye caught sight of something lying in the middle of the street; it was a dead horse. The next morning, by the time the police curfew was over, the carcass had been polished to the bone.

Father Sztuka's sermons, which I listened to carefully every Sunday, were long, dull and uninspiring. While I had no particular objections to that, I did object to, and could not forgive, the fact that he never, not even once, mentioned the terrible suffering

to which his fellow human beings—his “brothers and sisters” as he used to call them quite often—were subjected. There was an ongoing oppression of the entire population of Poland, marked almost daily by the summary executions of hundreds of Polish patriots. Yet, the Church’s pulpits were never used to defend the victims, Jewish or Polish, or to condemn the Nazi perpetrators and these crimes. Perhaps even more importantly, not once did he appeal to the occupying authorities for mercy or to the population for help and sympathy for the victims. It was only a few short months since the Warsaw Ghetto’s half-million people had been murdered, starved to death, or sent to the death camps; a short few months since the ghetto had been burned to the ground. The tragic events were still very fresh in people’s minds and hearts. Yet, about all these victims, there was only a dead silence.

The great moral power held by the Church and the individual priests were not used to uphold its own moral values. The Church with its elaborate infrastructure and communication channels was the only institution that really knew what was happening inside occupied Europe. It was the only institution *in situ* with both the prestige and the moral power to have spoken out and made an impact, but it remained silent. It failed us, Poles and Jews, and so, too, it failed, terribly and without forgiveness, itself.

The Russian front fell silent. “If the Russian frontline is in the east, why are the tanks moving west?” people were asking. They were moving west to fight the insurgents. Apart from military vehicles the streets were empty. Increasingly, we were worried about our

food situation: with no coming in of fresh supplies we wondered how long we could last. There were many children, sick, and elderly among us. With each passing day, people looked more tired and more resigned to an unknown fate.

In the morning of August 23, I heard a commotion: German SS gendarmes were going from house to house, calling for all young, and sometimes not so young, men to come out and assemble in the street. At first, we thought this to be a precautionary measure: to prevent young people from Praga, Grochow, and the vicinities from reinforcing those fighting in Warsaw and to ensure no “second front” east of the Vistula. We thought that we would be confined in a sort of a camp. We were wrong. We were about to be taken away, although to where we did not have the slightest idea.

Immediately, I decided to hide and, if discovered, to resist. After all, I was armed: I had a revolver and two grenades. I went to the basement looking for a good spot but my thoughts were muddled and panic-stricken. If I shot it out, I might kill one or two of them, but in the end I would be overpowered and die, unbeknownst to anyone. No one would ever know what had happened to me. Naturally, such an ending did not hold much appeal for me. Fully aware of how close we all were to war’s end, I abandoned any idea of resisting.

I was still mulling over what to do when a gendarme caught up with me. “*Raus, Raus,*” he shouted, “Take your things and move out to the assembly point! *Schnell, schnell!*” he barked his orders. I asked for—and got—a couple of minutes to get ready.

Upstairs in my room, I quickly packed a change of clothing, some food and tools into a backpack and my small briefcase—the one I escaped with from the Tomaszow camp. If anyone asked me, the tools were for electrical work, although a closer

examination of the tools would have revealed that their purpose was quite different; chisels, wood and metal blades from a handsaw, and wire cutters. These were tools much better suited to making an escape opening than fixing electric circuits.

I had one more task: to hide my arms arsenal. Normally I kept it in its hideout under the wardrobe, but since the Uprising I was keeping it “at the ready,” under the mattress. In the rush of the moment I thought of taking it with me. After all, this was the most precious possession I had. On second consideration, I thought it was too risky—should they find it on me, I would be dead in an instant. So I did something considerably more stupid instead, something that worried me for many, many months to come. I packed the revolver and the two grenades into the wood-burning oven and, to hide them from view, covered them with lots of crumbled newspapers. Then I went to the assembly point. What I failed to consider was that come next winter, my landlady would try to fire up the oven without first cleaning it and the house would blow up. She had a little daughter and her sister lived just below our apartment. I certainly did not want to put them in any danger and I often thought of the potential danger I had created for my landlady there at Kiprow Street. But it was a worry I could do nothing about.¹⁴

When I reached the main assembly place, there were already about one hundred to two hundred people gathered there. At ten o’clock sharp, six abreast, and guarded by the SS, we were marched to the East railroad station in Praga. There were almost all young men in the column that was about to be loaded onto the train. There were also a few young women; these were either wives who had volunteered to join their husbands or

¹⁴ When, in 1945, I did return to Warsaw, I rushed to Grochow, to Kiprow Street 5, to check on my landlady and her house, to see if there had been an explosion. My landlady was not home but the house, luckily, was still there.

they were taken because they were suspected of belonging to the Underground. At the station, we were loaded into closed cattle cars, about fifty to a car. An hour or two later the train started to move slowly westward, in the direction of Warsaw. Why were we taken—where to and what they were going to do to us—we did not know.

From close-up, the picture of Warsaw was even more gruesome than we had imagined. The skeletons of burned out, multi-story buildings started to appear on the horizon. There was a bleak expression on everybody's face, reflecting our concern for our loved ones, relatives, and friends: we all wondered what had happened to the people inside those buildings. The city of Warsaw was decimated. This beautiful city, often referred to as the Paris of the east, now was in ruins and lifeless, destroyed.

The train moved slowly westward, adding several cattle cars at three other Warsaw stations. The sight of flames and smoke completely surrounded us. Shooting could still be heard but not with the same intensity as earlier, since ammunition was running low and many fighters had already fallen. There were parachute drops from Allied planes but, sadly, by the time these drops arrived, the designated areas were no longer in Polish hands. The Uprising's offensive begun to transform itself into defense, regrouping, aiding the wounded, putting out the fires, and organizing common kitchens; it became a battle for survival. The heroism and zeal of the young insurgents could not overcome the overwhelming might and the brutal determination of the Nazis.

Our own status and destination remained a mystery. As soon as we left Warsaw, I began preparing for a possible escape. With the blades that I brought with me, I started to saw at the car's wooden floorboard but this activity did not last long. Several men, realizing what my plans were, decided that this would endanger all of them, including the

women among us, and asked me to stop at once. Reluctantly, I had no choice but to oblige.

In the locked car we were packed like sardines, with standing room only. The only fresh air we got came through four openings, about twenty-four inches by six or eight inches high, each in an upper corner of the car. This trip in a cattle car was a new experience to most, if not all, of the prisoners. The experience was also new to me but, as a Jew, I was bothered by it more than most because it reminded me of deportations from ghettos. After about two hours, we arrived at our temporary destination: a gigantic train repair yards in Pruszkow, a small town about twenty kilometers southwest of Warsaw. It was established as a transit camp for the masses of Warsaw deportees, prisoners of all sorts, and insurgents. Warsaw was being evacuated. As we learned later, the Germans had ordered a complete displacement of the city's inhabitants and the total destruction of the city.

Surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by Nazi SS and German soldiers, the camp was a welcome relief. At least, we were still in Poland. There was water and daily rations of food and there were some sanitary facilities (or at least some bushes), and there was fresh air. But there were no accommodations; everyone was on his/her own. There were many large empty buildings about but they were more like hangars and not very suitable as sleeping accommodations. The first night, I lay down next to a tree with my briefcase and backpack rolled into my coat-jacket, to make a pillow. I fell asleep in no time only to be awakened about midnight by ear-splitting thunder, and the sky lit up by lightening. The storm was unlike anything I had ever experienced. Unremittingly, rain lashed down in buckets. When I woke up, there was water on the ground all around and

underneath me. Soaked and chilled to the bone, I put my hat over my face, turned around and fell right back to sleep. I am not sure what prevailed, my youth or exhaustion.

The next couple of days were warm and sunny. I found a few pieces of office furniture and a place inside one of the hangers to protect myself from the elements in the future. The troubling question we all had was what the Germans were planning to do with us. When we arrived, there were tens of thousands of people there already; in addition, new transports were arriving every day, several times a day. But transports were also leaving. Many women, children, and elderly were shipped to various parts of occupied Poland while most middle-aged women and men were sent to labor camps in Germany. The most uncertain and most dangerous situation was that of young people like myself. We were prime candidates for concentration camps. The Germans classified all young people as Polish fighters as they were not able to distinguish between combatants and civilians; the insurgents did not wear uniforms—only easily discarded white and red armbands—and by the time they got to Pruszkow they had no weapons on them. Moreover, because the Germans had so far refused to grant the insurgents a combatant status, which would have provided them with the protection of the Geneva Convention, they referred to all of us as “*Die polnische Banditen*.” Thus, although I was not caught as a fighter, I was classified as a “Polish bandit,” just because of my age. As time passed, it became clear that most of the transports with young people were indeed going straight to concentration camps, including Auschwitz. According to Paulsson, 60,000 of the Warsaw population, both combatants and civilians that passed through the Pruszkow camp, ended up in these camps.

In the distance, Warsaw continued to burn.

Chapter 18: THE PRINTER'S TRANSPORT

Transports from Pruszkow destined for labor camps in Germany consisted of various specialists to be employed in Germany in the appropriate industry. In one of these transports, a group of printers from the Printing Office in Warsaw was being sent to a Vienna camp to work in the State Printing Office of Vienna. That sounded like a good opportunity for me. The German WIFO employees of the Warsaw *Baustelle* where I had worked, including Mrs. Follman and Mr. Miertschning, had all been transferred to WIFO's branch in Liebau, near Vienna. Knowing that Austria was a Catholic country, it struck me that they might be kinder to Catholic Poles. Moreover, at the very least, a job in Vienna removed the risk of being sent to a concentration camp. My main concern now was how to get onto that particular transport. To start with, I moved closer to the group of real printers and quickly added the word "*Drucker*" (printer) to the "occupation" line of my labor card that already said "electrician." I doubted that this simple addition would convince anyone to give me a free ride to Vienna—there must have been a list of the printers from the Warsaw Printing Office—but I had nothing to lose.

One morning, as I was milling around the camp, one of the guards, a *Wehrmacht* soldier on the other side of the barbed wire fence, called over to me, "Hey! What are you doing here?" I did not recognize him, as soldiers in uniform often looked alike to me, but he explained that he knew me from the *Baustelle* in Warsaw and that, on occasion, he had even borrowed a few tools from me. We exchanged a few words and then he asked "Can I do something for you?" I told him that I wanted to continue to work with the people from the Warsaw WIFO, now in Vienna, and that I knew a transport to Vienna

was being readied. He said that he would try to help me and, that same afternoon, he came back to the spot where we had agreed to meet, to take me to the transit camp commander, an SS *Obersturmbahnfuhrer*. The visit was short but it yielded the desired result: The commander declared that since the *Feldwebel* vouched for me, my transfer was acceptable to him. Within minutes the order to put me on the Vienna transport was typed and signed. He gave it to me and, with a wave of his hand that looked like “now, get lost,” he dismissed me.

Luck was with me yet again. Not only was I now scheduled to be shipped to Vienna, I was no longer part of the combatants or “bandits” group. It also meant I was exempt from being shipped elsewhere, possibly to a death camp. I didn’t know what the future had in store for me in Vienna but this piece of paper had improved my prospects and my mood considerably. This anonymous “bandit,” with an uncertain, life-threatening fate, had become a certified worker destined for a labor camp in Austria.

It seemed that extracting or falsifying documents, and looking for ways to get around the rules had become second nature to me. I also encountered a good share of luck and ran into fortunate coincidences. As for the soldier guard who helped me, I never learned what his name was and never saw him again.

I now stuck really close to the group of printers on their way to Vienna, about thirty in all. Gradually, other stragglers, both men and women joined us. By the time the transport was ready to depart, there were about forty-four of us, mostly young men and women, and four Catholic priests.

One morning, after getting some bread and black coffee, we were loaded onto a freight car, one with a sliding door in the middle and two little windows way up in

diagonally opposite corners. The car was then attached to a row of other cars and a locomotive. German policemen were assigned to guard the transport, with an elderly policeman from Vienna guarding our group.

The odyssey from Pruszkow to Vienna started on a high note. We were happy to have a destination and to know we were heading to a labor, rather than a concentration, camp. We were glad to be out of the transit camp environment where any semblance of order and normalcy was quickly breaking down. Every day more and more people arrived from Warsaw making the meager facilities painfully inadequate. Although the Germans were releasing great numbers of women and older men to ameliorate the camp's supply situation, thousands of young people continued to crowd into the depot and young men were still treated by the Germans as "Polish bandits." We thought that the presence of four priests would give us some measure of protection. Yet, although this put us in good spirits, we could never forget that we were still the "low human race" (*Untermenschen*) Poles, the despised rebels of Warsaw, whose comrades were fighting a life and death battle against Germany, and that we were still prisoners.

When the train finally rolled out of the depot, our guard placed himself at the partly open door, sitting on the floor with his gun on his lap. Not a word was exchanged between him and us. I settled on the floor near the corner, under one of the four small windows. There seemed to be enough room for everyone to lie down, a distinct improvement over the trip from the Warsaw district of Praga to Pruszkow where we all had to stand.

The first two hours of the journey passed quietly. Then, we reached a small station and the train suddenly stopped. Without a word, our guard jumped off, locked the

door, and disappeared. After an hour, when he still had not returned, we gradually became more apprehensive. This seemed to be a bad omen of things to come. It was another hour before our guard returned and the train, without explanation, started to move again.

The trip to Vienna, which we expected to take one or two days, took three weeks. During this time, forty-four people were cooped up in a cattle car for three weeks, most of the time without water or food. When we did stop at a railroad station, we could make purchases from the bar there. The problem was that, only occasionally, was there any food for sale, although we could buy some drinks and fill our canteens with water. If a Red Cross office happened to be at the station, they provided us with some provisions, usually hot soup, or milk with dark bread. Most of the time, though, the train would stop in the middle of nowhere, for no apparent reason or length of time; sometimes we would be left standing there for hours on end. On occasion, we were allowed out, under the watchful eye of the guard, to search for nourishment in the immediate vicinity. Once we were even successful, when we found three sacks of discarded, rotten pears. To relieve ourselves, we were let out at random times, sometimes only once a day, at the whim of our guard. At times, when our train stopped at a railroad crossing and our door was open, people behind the barrier would throw edible items to us: a quarter loaf of bread, apples, pieces of a chicken, or a jar of marmalade. Others just waved to us with unfurled handkerchiefs, wishing us good luck.

We were a three-car transport with an extra passenger car for the police guards. Occasionally, one or two cars with deportees like us would be attached to our convoy, or the same number would be detached. As time went on, the periods when a locomotive

pulled us forward became increasingly rare, while the times we sat in the middle of nowhere became more and more frequent. Sometimes we sat for days at a time. We were hungry and thirsty all the time; we were bored, and very, very dirty as we had not washed in weeks.

Most of the time, people just sat on the floor quietly, expressionless, and in a semi-daze. I mostly kept to myself. I was polite to everybody but friendly with no one. Being reserved was partly in my character but it was also deliberate, as I did not want to be asked too many questions. Someone may have known the house I lived in, my family, or the school I attended. I was also afraid of becoming too talkative; I wanted to avoid any slips of the tongue. One young lady, whose sleeping and sitting place was right next to mine, and with whom I liked to talk, was Lucyna. She was about two to three years older than I and was a student of chemistry at one of Warsaw's "clandestine universities." No matter what subject we started discussing, she would find a relationship between that topic and some law or principle in chemistry, or science in general, relating the war, the chaos in the world and the mass displacement of populations to the principle of entropy, defined as the steady increase in disorder and disorganization in any close system. I understood very little of her explanations but I tried to be a good listener.

Twice a day, in the morning and evening, the group would intone some traditional religious songs. *Wszystkie nasze dzienne sprawy* (All Our Daily Problems) was one whose words I still remember. And that was when I would come to life: I sang the loudest. In fact, often I would initiate the singing even though I never had a good voice. My enthusiastic singing was interpreted as piety. That, and my general behavior throughout the trip, made a lasting impression on the four priests who shared our "Orient

Express.” Months later, when the group gathered for a typical Polish Christmas Eve (*Wigilia*) dinner in Vienna, the four priests on my convoy who had organized the evening conducted the services. The festivities followed uneventfully, but when the time came for the traditional sharing of the wafer with his “flock,” the head priest, a middle-aged, heavy-set, friendly man, decided to preface the sharing with a little introduction. He rose and said, “I wish to share my first wafer with Zenon, who is a shining example of a good Pole and a good Christian.” Confused and in disbelief, I rose; he approached me and placed the wafer on my tongue. Little did the priest know how much his words were off the mark but, at the same time, how very much they were appreciated. After the dinner, a couple of men patted me on the back in a congratulatory manner. The young women in the group seemed to be more ambivalent: sure, I might be upright and pious, but how much fun was I? I was thrilled with my performance. Inside, however, I was partly embarrassed and partly confused. There were times, albeit brief, when I was not so sure how much of a performance it really was.

During the third week of our journey towards our destination, emaciated and both mentally and physically exhausted, we reached Studhof, a small town in Austria, a few miles north of Vienna. At first we had no idea where we were or why we had stopped there. But we found out very soon that it was a place for quarantine, a requirement for all prisoners entering the Third Reich. Since I had never been quarantined, I did not give it much thought. Certainly, I did not think it was a reason for concern.

But I was wrong. The quarantine called for both men and women to take off all their clothes, so the prisoners could shower while their garments are being sent off for disinfection. Both sexes were given a piece of soap and led to communal shower facilities

and then to two waiting rooms, separated by an open door. From the time I heard we would have to disrobe, my entire being was filled with alarm. What if someone saw me now and questioned my being circumcised? I was also constantly aware that “a guilty person looks guilty.” Fortunately, I was in luck again—with the open door between the two waiting rooms, those on the other side of the door became the focal point of the men’s curiosity, not me. Except for the priests who remained seated on benches located around the room, the rest of the men focused all their attention on the opposite sex. They had neither the time nor the inclination to consider if any of the males in the waiting room were circumcised or not.

In the early afternoon, our clothing and our few worldly possessions came back. We dressed and continued milling around, as there was absolutely nothing to occupy our time. Across the street from our facility was a small kiosk, which I asked, and got permission, to visit. It had mostly newspapers and magazines, some knickknacks and postcards with printed stamps on them. With the few German marks I had on me, I quickly bought a couple.

The first people to whom I wrote were the Szokalskis in Tomaszow, telling them that I was alive and safe, and thanking them. But, strictly for safety reasons, I did not give my return address, aware that the less they knew, the better. Their daughter Lucja told me many years later, how happy they were to hear from me, to know that I was still alive. The second card I wrote was to Mrs. Follman, the secretary at WIFO, in Warsaw, who helped me get my permits to go to Lodz. I did not have her exact address, only the company’s name and location. I wrote her that I would like to work for WIFO once more and that I would be writing again as soon as I had a “permanent” address. I crossed the

street back to the facility. I was a little surprised at the laxity of the place, since I was still considered a prisoner, but at the time, I did not think too much about it.

At the end of the day we were given two blankets each and told to prepare for the night on the floor of the room we were in. We were also given five diamond-shaped patches of cloth—no bigger than three by two inches—with a white letter “P” on a dark blue background, to be worn on all outside clothing. The next morning we were to be transported by trucks to our final destination—a camp in Vienna.

Chapter 19: A BIRD WITHOUT WINGS

In the morning, as scheduled, we were loaded on three trucks and delivered to the camp, located on Landsmannstrasse-Hauptstrasse, in the third district of Vienna. The camp was a complex of barracks and small buildings, surrounded by a six-foot wooden fence. One military sentry, in full gear, stood next to the main entrance gate, guarding it. The security both struck and surprised me. What kind of camp was this? On the one hand, we were prisoners from the Warsaw Uprising; on the other, we were sent here as laborers, with the majority of our group slated to work in a printing office. But this camp did not look like either a prisoner of war or a labor camp. It most certainly did not resemble the Tomaszow labor camp where I had lived and worked. There were other prisoners in the camp, of various nationalities but of similar mix: men and women of different ages, brought there for forced labor purposes.

The accommodations in the camp were extremely Spartan. There were no bunks or cots, no chairs or tables—just a few simple wooden benches against the walls. For the night, each one of us settled on the bare floor with the couple of blankets, which we had received in Stuthoff. The facilities, including those for washing, were all outdoors; but it was still summer so we could live with that. As for food, the portions were meager and not very nutritious, but we were fed three times a day. All in all, it was an improvement over the difficult conditions we were subjected to in Pruszkow and during the three-week journey here. Our main problem was boredom; there was nothing to occupy our time. Mostly, we rested all day from our long and tiring journey, chatted with each other or just milled aimlessly around the courtyard.

For the first few days, nothing special happened. There was no daily roll call like we had had in the Tomaszow camp and there were no work assignments. Our major concern was that we did not know what the future held for us. If this was just a transit camp, rather than a labor camp, then we wanted to know where next we would be shipped. The possibility that we might be taken to a concentration camp was never far from our minds.

Between the lax security in the camp, the daily idleness, and an uncertain future, once again my mind turned to the possibilities of an escape. I thought that either I could seek my old job at WIFO or I blend into the local population and find a regular job as an electrician. I scouted the perimeter of the camp for the least conspicuous places, both inside and outside, and determined that the best place would be the corner of the camp and the best time to leave, after dark. My decision to escape was more a spontaneous impulse than a rational, well thought-out plan. I did not know either the city or anybody in it. I had only one contact: Mrs. Follman. But although I had written her again with my new address, I hadn't heard from her. If I did escape, I had no idea where I would spend the first night or where my first meal would come from. Yet, not to escape, especially when it was so easy, seemed a missed opportunity. It was now an ingrained instinct in me that when I heard the word "camp," I immediately thought, "escape."

It happened the next evening. Without telling anyone, I collected my backpack and my briefcase, and, ten minutes later, I was on the other side of the fence. Free as a bird but, unfortunately, without wings.

My emotions ran the gamut from euphoria to anxiety. For the next two hours, I zigzagged in the direction of the city center, savoring the fresh, free, evening air and

wondering where I would spend the night. I was afraid that I might be caught and worried sick about the uncertainty that awaited me in the days ahead. But then I thought of being in a Nazi camp, no matter how benign, and I was happy to be free.

The streets were very quiet with few pedestrians, mainly women rushing home after late work. I was becoming increasingly tired, both emotionally and physically, when I stumbled upon the Stadtpark, a renowned city garden. There was no problem finding a suitable place to sleep, between the bushes and shrubbery, with a bust of a famous composer on a pedestal for company. There was even a place I could refresh myself under one of the several fountains. I fell asleep thinking about the things I wanted to do tomorrow.

The next day started on a promising note. I walked from the park into the city's center, the "Ring," in the First district. What a sight before me: Vienna was beautiful, with wide, tree-lined boulevards filled with beautiful monuments and splendid palaces—the Opera house, the Hofburg Castle, the Parliament, the Burgtheater, and many, many other wonders of art and architecture, all just within a few blocks. I bought a newspaper, the *Voelkische Beobachter*, and then looked for a coffeehouse where I could get breakfast, my stomach growling in hungry anticipation.

An old waiter in a tuxedo opened the door as I entered the coffee shop, greeting me with "*Gruess Gott*" (God bless you). He accompanied me to a plush booth and offered me a glass of water the minute I sat down—all before I had a chance to utter a word. As he served me coffee, I started to order breakfast, my hunger strengthened by the enticing aromas surrounding me. He looked at me politely and asked, "Where are your ration cards?"

“I don’t have any,” I replied, “I’m a traveler, in transit.”

“But travelers also get ration cards,” he argued. “I’m sorry but I can’t serve you breakfast.”

Frustrated, and in an effort to fill my empty stomach before trying again somewhere else, I had three cups of bitter-tasting coffee while I read my paper. The *Voelkischer Beobachter* carried a front-page article about the Warsaw Uprising. The good news was that the Russian Army not only occupied the entire eastern part of Warsaw, including Praga and Grochow, but had also managed to establish a beachhead on the western shore of the Vistula. This was a clear defeat for the Germans and, more importantly, it would take the pressure off the Warsaw insurgents. A second news item was also important: The Germans, after strong intervention by the Allies, had granted Polish fighters of *Armja Krajowa* the status of combatants, which now gave them protection and certain rights under the Geneva Convention. This meant that the rest of us in captivity would now be accorded the status of prisoners of war as well—we were no longer the “Polish bandits.”

The bad news was that the Uprising was about to come to a tragic end. What promised to be a glorious liberation of Poland’s capital from five years of murderous occupation was about to end in a catastrophe. Indeed, a few days later, on October 2, after a valiant and courageous fight that lasted over two months, Warsaw capitulated. Commander Bor-Komorowski and his men laid down their arms and were marched off to a prisoner of war camps. The city was 90 percent destroyed and 250,000 of a population of around one million had been killed, maimed or wounded. Of the remaining inhabitants,

many were dispersed but tens of thousands were taken prisoner and sent to Germany to labor and concentration camps. Despondent and hungry, I paid for the coffee and left.

I went out into the streets again in my search for breakfast in one of the many coffeehouses. To my dismay, the answer was the same at two other establishments; no ration book, no breakfast. Aware that I had to find a solution to this serious problem, my next stop was a bank, where I exchanged a small amount of zlotys for an even smaller amount of marks. I proceeded to a telephone center to make a call to Mrs. Follman. When she answered the phone I felt my spirits revive; I had found someone, perhaps the only person in Austria, who could help me. She was pleasant, as always, and glad that I had reached Vienna. But, my mood soon deflated as she warned me: "Don't come to Liebau. The Americans are bombing us every night. Many people you know have been killed or wounded." Being cautious, I did not tell her that I had run away from a camp and was floundering in the city. I gave her the camp's address and told her that I would try to get an assignment as an electrician elsewhere in the city, promising to call her back.

I went to several food stores trying to purchase something to eat but the response was always the same, as in the coffeehouses. They could only sell food in exchange for ration cards. I couldn't even get a slice of bread. Unsuccessful in my quest for a meal, I tried to find accommodations. I looked for a private room or even just a bed, avoiding hotels or agencies where registration would be required. In the camp they had my name and my ID card number and for all I knew there might have been an all-points bulletin out, searching for me. But as I soon found out, Vienna was not Warsaw. In every building, on the first night, the concierge was duty bound to report any stranger who spent more than twelve hours in his building to the police. There were no exceptions. So I

spent my second night in Vienna at the main railroad station. It would have been all right if not for periodic document checks by the gendarmes, looking for deserters or people like me. Their presence sent me back to the park for the following two nights.

With no way to obtain food in a restaurant or store, I became a scavenger, wandering around the back of fruit and vegetable stores, picking up the rotting goods the store was throwing out. I also took to loitering behind restaurants in order to pick up food the patrons left on their plates and which the kitchen girls were about to throw out. After a few days I found one place that did not ask for ration cards and so, for a special meal with ambiance, I ate at this rather elegant and well-known restaurant by the name of *Rathauskeller* (so called because it was located in the basement of the *Rathaus*, the City Hall). There, not only could I get coffee and load up on sugar cubes, I could also order up to two portions of marinated herring, all without a ration card. For the next three days I became a steady customer, sometimes for lunch *and* dinner. The place was beautifully decorated, tables were covered with white tablecloth with china and shiny cutlery, and the service was impeccable; just what any ex-camp inmate has been accustomed to!

In the mean time, I presented myself to a couple of local electrical outfits, offering my services, but with no luck. I did not have a German labor card and in Vienna my Polish card was worthless. Everyone I approached sent me away with typical Viennese politeness (*...es tut mir soooo leid*) but without sympathy or concern. Unlike Warsaw, the Viennese were strict and meticulously followed the laws.

As days, even hours, passed, I grew increasingly worried. How was I going to survive? Sooner or later someone would recognize my illegal status and denounce me

and that seemed worse than the camp on Landsmannstrasse. What was the good of being free if I was unable to find a job?

On the fifth day I was desperate. I saw no way out of my dilemma but to return to the camp. It was ironic that when hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of inmates yearned to be free, I felt so desperate on the outside that I wanted to surrender, ready to even face the possibility of ending up in a concentration camp. But I saw no way out.

That evening, as soon as it got dark, I scaled the six-foot fence the same way as before, my mind preoccupied with the potential consequences of my adventure. My fellow inmates were surprised to see me back in the camp. I must have looked as haggard and exhausted as I felt because before even hearing my story they insisted that I have something to eat and drink. When I told them what had happened they, too, had hard time believing that life could be so regimented. In Poland and especially in Warsaw, laws were but challenges, to be evaded.

But they too had a story to tell me; one that concerned and frightened me.

The day before, a German had come to the camp looking for me. He was tall and slim, in civilian clothing, but with a Nazi insignia in his lapel. He wanted to know where I was but they could not help him, so he left. They had no idea who he was or why he was looking for me. As I listened attentively, I felt the blood drain from my face. I feared the worst; this man could be from the camp authority looking for me, although, in this unusual camp, they didn't seem to have missed me after I escaped and didn't seem to notice now that I had returned. That meant that he was probably a Gestapo agent. Perhaps someone I had contacted in Vienna, like the electrical outfits, had denounced me. I tried

to remain calm, but that night, I couldn't sleep, worried about who the German was, what he wanted and if he would return for me.

One morning, about a week later, the man with the Nazi emblem in his lapel did return and we met face to face. He must have seen the fear in my eyes because he immediately started to explain the purpose of his visit—a job opportunity. He explained that his electrical company needed electricians and that Mrs. Follman, an acquaintance of his, gave him my name as the man for the job. “There is a problem, however,” he told me. “The camp commander has no authority to release anyone to a private firm that is not producing war material,” he said, letting me know that he had tried to get me out but was unsuccessful.

I could hardly wait to propose a plan, which would solve this problem.

“If you can give me a place to sleep and provide daily a minimum amount of food, I can be at your place of work tomorrow morning.” I said. “You do not have to worry about the camp's commander. I know how to get out of here.” I suggested he pick me up that very evening, outside the camp's fence. He readily agreed to the plan. In the evening, at nine o'clock sharp, I threw my backpack and my briefcase over the fence, and joined him on the other side. We took the streetcar to the company's place: Edward F. Neubauer, Elektrische Anlagen. Am Hof 2, First District (Vienna I). On the streetcar, we chatted. I assumed that he was an employee of the firm and I queried him: What kind of work were they involved in? Who are the other electricians? And, among other questions, what kind of man is the big boss? To the last question he just mumbled something unintelligible.

Once more, I was free of confinement. Mrs. Follman might have arranged it, but the way I felt, this man from the Elektrische Anlagen, was a godsend.

I was free again!

Chapter 20: AN ELECTRICIAN IN VIENNA

The first three nights I slept in the office of the big boss: sometimes on the floor, which was hard but spacious, and sometimes on his armchair, which was soft but terribly uncomfortable. After a few days, I was given a small but neat room on the company's premises with a real bed and bedding. Gertrude, Mr. Neubauer's very young and sweet secretary, was put in charge of my meals. She was blond and pretty, a little plump, and particularly solicitous and concerned about my comfort. It soon became obvious that Gertrude was more than just a secretary, and she usually left the office together with the big boss. Her plumpness, moreover, was due to her being pregnant. And who was the big boss? It was no other than the man that picked me up from the camp.

The new work gave me some apprehension, not because the actual tasks were hard or complex but only because of my questionable qualifications. Overall, the job appeared to be promising; the conditions seemed good and the required skills were not overly sophisticated. At first, a lot of time was spent on my training, to acquaint me with the local codes and the general business of the company. In the firm, there were about twenty-five of us. This included one other Austrian woman, an office clerk who always looked morose and unhappy as her husband was missing in action on the Russian front, some Russians, Ukrainians, and one other Pole. What pleased me most in these first few days, however, were the meals. They were a sheer delight! Courtesy of Gertrude (or her mother), I was presented with home-cooked Viennese cuisine; I had not had a home-cooked meal in years. Unfortunately this lasted only the first three weeks. After that, I got my own ration cards; this meant that I had been legalized, giving me a degree of job

security. I am sure that Mr. Neubauer's membership in the Nazi party greatly facilitated this change in my status.

A new stage of my survival had started, assuming, of course, that the camp administrators did not catch up with me. Once more, I felt lucky. Although Vienna was still under the German heel, blackmailers, like the ever-present *szmalcownicy* of Warsaw, did not threaten me here. In Vienna, I was one of tens of thousands of foreigners, all of us speaking different languages, all looking and acting differently. Somehow, I felt safer and more confident that I would survive the war, more so now than at any time since my escape from the Tomaszow camp. After all, the war was coming to an end and, to the best of my knowledge, no one was looking for Jews that were hiding in Vienna. Or, perhaps it was the beauty of Vienna and the blue Danube (which was never blue) that filled me with such hope and confidence.

But while these feelings filled my daytime, it was different at night, especially when images of suffering and death disturbed my rest. How could I feel free and secure among the very people who perpetrated—and continued to perpetrate—such terrible crimes? How could I feel content among those who had caused so much death and suffering not only to the Jews and the people of occupied Europe but even to their own people? These questions followed me to sleep, exhausting me night after night. I was lost for answers.

After a few weeks, my boss told me that he was working on legitimizing my residence in the city as well as legalizing my labor status. He appeared to be an influential Nazi party member so I had no doubt that he would accomplish it. I felt fairly safe about my job already, but his efforts were an additional indication that he had been

pleased with my work and had no plans to let me go. Even though I was not an expert electrician, I had the advantage over his other workers of knowing German. I also found that I was comparatively more familiar with the modern tools and electrical appliances we used here than my Russian coworkers. When we had a difficult problem, we consulted the German technical handbooks. But often I was sent out to do repairs in private homes and that had one major disadvantage: I was on my own. There was no one to consult with, no handbooks and no one to help when an extra pair of hands was needed. I worried that any incompetence on my part would send me back to the camp. But it also had a few distinct advantages—I did not have my boss looking over my shoulder, and I got to crisscross the city—in the process learning about and admiring the masterpieces of the European Renaissance, which Vienna held in such rich abundance.

Several weeks after I arrived in Vienna, I saw Miertsching again, for the last time. He had heard from Mrs. Follman that I was in Vienna and asked her to arrange meeting with me. He and I met at a coffeehouse on one of the city squares, the Swedenplatz, for about fifteen minutes. We chatted mostly about the situation at his place of work, which was being bombarded now every night by Allied planes. He inquired about my work at the Neubauer Company but the subject of his joining the Underground was never brought up. I never figured out, then or since, if his attempt to join the Underground was sincere; nor did I know why he wanted to meet me in Vienna. My best guess is that he had sensed my doubts, and discomfort, about his request and that he wanted now to reaffirm to me his sincerity. Before parting, he took two hundred German Marks (RM) out of his pocket and gave it to me saying, “I am sure you can use it.” He was most certainly right on that account and I accepted it without hesitation. (Two hundred Reich’s Marks was roughly

equivalent to my month and a half salary; a dinner in a restaurant, with ration cards, was about two RM's).

Besides its beauty, what struck me most about wartime Vienna was that its inhabitants were predominantly women. Only here and there one encountered an old man, and of course, there were the foreign workers, like the ones working for Mr. Neubauer. But mostly one saw only women, in the shops, offices and in people's homes. Mr. Neubauer, who was in his early forties, was an exception and I always wondered on what grounds he had been exempted. Was it because he was a successful and rich businessman and had bought somebody off, or was it because he was such an ardent Nazi? Or both?

One morning, I was sent to a construction site where a large motor for a woodcutting machine was out of order. It was sort of an emergency, as the carpenter's schedule was tight and several workers were idle, waiting for the motor to be repaired. My problem was that I had never seen a motor up close much less repaired one; I had no clue about how to fix it. This required skills way beyond replacing a switch or splicing broken wires. There was no time to read the trouble-shooting manual either. I turned off the power to the motor and proceeded to strip layer after layer of components, carefully marking where each component came from and in what sequence. I was looking for a broken part; loose wire, screw, or connection. But I had no such luck and the more I tried to fix it, the more hopeless it seemed. A sense of panic began to creep into my mind as I imagined the consequences of my failure. Finally, since I had no idea what to do, I gave up and put each part back where it belonged, and prepared to face my boss's ire and a kick to the other side of the door. I was already at the exit when something moved me to

go back and turn on the switch. Brrrrrrrrrrrrrr! As I heard the motor revving up, the sound instantly transformed my panic into joy.

On my return to the office, my boss congratulated me. The supervisor on site must have already notified him. Little did he know how much this job had terrified me and how close I had come to throwing in the towel and confessing my lack of experience. Fortunately, he did not ask what was wrong with the motor or how it was repaired.

Although Mr. Neubauer helped me escape the confinement of the camp, and by doing so, gave me the chance for a freer life, I neither liked nor trusted him. He was an angry and mean-spirited man. A fanatical Nazi, proudly displaying his party's insignia on his lapels, he still rooted and hoped for a Nazi victory at this late date in 1944. I realized that all his help and assistance was self-serving, motivated by his business's need for an electrician, especially one with some knowledge of German, and not by any desire to help a fellow human being. He seemed to delight in his almost daily diatribes against the Russian workers, calling them low life, lazy, and incapable of doing their work. A few times I saw him running towards the Russian quarters with a revolver in his hand, cursing them for some minor insubordination. A married man with a family, he had an affair with his secretary, who was less than half his age, and kept her hidden and locked up during the latter part of her pregnancy in a separate apartment. His beautiful apartment in an exclusive part of town was filled with famous paintings, crystals, rugs, and antiques and I couldn't help but wonder who the original owners of these items were. I stayed away from him—even avoided him—as much as I could.

Chapter 21: A BURDEN LIFTED

Although I had comfortable accommodations, enough food, a satisfactory job, and above all, freedom and relative safety, I was lonely and alone. I longed for family, friends, for some measure of normalcy. Even my false identity was a burden to me. In Warsaw I had quite a few friends, people knew who I was; but here no one knew.

The majority of Austrians, just like the majority of Germans, were rabid Nazis—at least, that was my perception. Generally, the people I met while working lamented the war shortages, cursed the bombing by the allies, and worried that the war was lasting too long; many were in mourning for their fallen sons and brothers. But one thing was sure: no one wondered what had happened to their Jewish friends, neighbors, or colleagues. Typically, they refrained from expressing political views. Those who held anti-Nazi views did not speak, out of fear of being sent to a concentration camp. Those who still supported the Nazis kept quiet out of fear of what might happen to them after the war was lost. Most had by now realized that no war was ever won by continuous “victorious retreats” which was exactly what was happening to Germany on all fronts.

But in one of the places where I worked as an electrician for several days, at the home of the Kauschler family, anti-Nazi feelings were expressed not only openly but with unique force and conviction. When Marianne, the Kauschlers’ daughter, invited me for dinner at their home one night, I accepted it gladly. Marianne was about thirty-years-old, a stage actress who performed both in Vienna and Berlin, and a divorcee. Her parents owned a little food market on a nearby square. Recently, their only son had been killed on the battlefield in Norway and the family was in mourning. While both parents worked

long hours, Marianne spent her time at home, cleaning, doing needlework, and reading. In her own loneliness she sought out my company. Each week we spent two or three evenings together, listening to music or just chatting. Not only did I enjoy the home atmosphere and home cooking, I was also flattered that someone would care to exchange thoughts with me. After several weeks of meeting like this, one evening, without warning, she sprang up from the table, quickly closed all the windows and curtains, and turned on the radio. Soon, the familiar signal “tatata tam, tatata tam” of the BBC’s wartime refrain, filled the room. This was strictly prohibited by the Nazis and listening to a foreign broadcast in wartime could cost a person their life. We had known each other only a few weeks, but she had quickly realized that we both longed to be connected to the outside world and even more, that we longed to hear the truth—namely, that the Nazis’ situation was much worse than their propaganda machine made people believe.

The trust that Marianne showed me that night and a few more times thereafter led to a dilemma within me. Increasingly, I felt uncomfortable in not reciprocating that trust, telling her made-up stories about my family and my background, and not telling her who I really was. The emotional burden of pretending, day after day, month after month, that I was someone other than who I really was, tormented me. A desire to tell someone about my life, my true identity, lay constantly just under the surface, but, until now, I did not dare. Lying or pretending to a policeman or an agent of authority was quite easy; it was done to save my life. But doing the same to a close friend, like Wladek in Warsaw, or now Marianne, was a weight on my conscience.

Thus, one evening, spurred on by Marianne’s trust in me, I blurted it all out. Before I could stop myself, the words spilled out of me, like a torrent that couldn’t be

held back. At that moment I didn't care about the possible consequences or Marianne's reaction. I told her I had been hiding under an assumed name for the last year and a half. I told her how my luck had had its ups and downs, but how optimistic I felt now, that the war was coming to an end and my chances for survival were improving significantly. I told her also what had been happening to the Jews in occupied Poland and what had happened to some of my family members and my fears for the remaining ones. I told her about my parents and sister in the Lodz Ghetto. I told her how brutal and inhuman the Germans were and how much the Jews and other people, but especially the Jews, had to suffer. I stopped, drained by my outburst, and held my breath. Her reaction, at first, was one of shock and sadness. She came close and embraced me, saying how glad she was that I had managed to survive and thanked me for the trust I had shown her. She told me that she knew—that they all knew—something bad had been happening to the Jews at the hands of the Germans, but they did not know what, they did not know how bad it was. She lowered her head, visibly shaken by the things she had just heard, embarrassed by her ignorance of all the horrible things that were happening in the world, in her name, by her own people, in her own land. When she lifted her head again, I saw that she was crying.

We turned the conversation to other things, talking about her and her loneliness, her failed marriage, the loss of her brother. Yet, as we talked, she seemed more distant and I sensed that something was bothering her. There were moments when she would become very quiet and pensive and that, in turn, began to disturb me. Had I endangered myself? Did I say too much by confessing to living a double life? I began to worry but at the same time, I felt like a heavy stone had been lifted off my shoulders. I felt relief for

having shared my secret with someone and finally doing what I had wanted to do for a long time.

The next time I saw Marianne I discovered what had been troubling her. She did not know it at the time but, during her sleepless hours that night, she realized what it was—she regretted that I had revealed my secret to her.

“Should something happen to you tomorrow, I would not want you to think, not even for it to cross your mind, that I might have had something to do with it,” she told me.

“But I would never think that of you,” I said.

“Still, it’s wartime. You never know what might happen. One doesn’t know how one would react under certain circumstances” (meaning, under torture).

I understood her worry. I thought that this showed her sensitivity; yet, I was at a loss as to whether I should feel glad that my burden had been lifted or sad that I had created a new burden for Marianne. In the months that followed, our friendly relationship continued as before, even strengthened, but the topic of my true identity never came up again. I also visited her house less frequently. Soon, Marianne’s loneliness and political interests in anti-Nazism were replaced by the romantic attentions showered on her by a young Frenchman. Although still friends, we now saw each other only on special occasions.

In November 1944, I rented a private room from a local family, on Lilienbrunnngasse 19, in the Second district, and moved away from the communal quarters of the Neubauer firm. Except for my periodic bouts of loneliness and a constant, lingering concern for my parents and other close family and friends, I led a normal wartime life. I

had comfortable accommodations and a solid job; I even had a chance for some entertainment, going to the movies or cafés. Often in the evenings, I visited a café where a young, blind piano player, in his late twenties, played. The place was semi-dark, quiet and serene, and the music, which he played from memory, was delightful. I knew some of the composers—Schumann, Liszt, and Chopin—although before the war, I had never been to a concert and only heard classical music on the radio. It was a new and a wonderful experience.

Other times, especially on weekends, I spent time in the old-style Viennese coffee houses, where I sipped *Kaffee mit Sahne* (ersatz coffee with foamed cream). Despite the war, these places still offered a pleasant and comfortable environment. In winter, they were well heated and always offered a library of newspapers and magazines. What I enjoyed most was that I could sit there for hours, read all the papers I wanted, and use their elegant and clean facilities—all for the price of a few *Kaffee mit Sahne*.

The food, in general, which one could buy only with ration cards, was not plentiful, but more than sufficient. Each morning, on my way to work, I would pick up eight little rolls, called *waeckerls* at the bakery. Each day, I was determined to eat them for breakfast, in the office. Invariably, however, my appetite got the better of these plans and I would consume all of them long before I got to work. I ate lunch and dinner at various places; some workplaces offered cafeteria-style facilities. But more importantly, as I remember it, after I had settled into a routine life in Vienna, I was neither ever hungry nor did I feel in danger of being unmasked. My life seemed no longer threatened in any way. I led a life that was as normal as that of any foreign laborer.

In addition, there was now someone in Vienna who knew who I really was. The burden was lifted and it made a difference.

Chapter 22: A MATTER OF DAYS

In January 1945, the Russian Army conquered Warsaw and most of Western Poland. The Russians were also rapidly advancing on the Central-European front, and in March they surrounded Budapest, Hungary, about one hundred miles east of Vienna. Vienna was expected to be the next target. In the meantime, the German armies were retreating everywhere, sometimes fighting only in isolated pockets. The news from all battlefields, including the Western Front, heralded Germany's defeat.

On the surface, the anticipated liberation would be the fulfillment of my dreams, culminating all my efforts with a successful conclusion. In reality, however, it raised many concerns, even fears. I wondered what would follow the Russian Army's entry into Vienna. For me, "liberation" was an abstract concept, and I had no idea what I would do after it happened. I had been a fifteen-year-old boy when the war had started. I was now a twenty-year-old young man, whose experiences for the last five years had revolved around my self-preservation. How would the liberators treat me—with sympathy? With indifference? Perhaps they would be scornful because while they were fighting and risking their lives on the battlefield, I was living the life of a civilian in the hinterland.

Just in case, I quickly began to study Russian. I already knew conversational Russian but now I set about learning how to read and write it. In the meantime, while the general mood in Vienna became increasingly depressing and somber, my job situation took a turn for the better. I became the chief maintenance electrician in a building near the headquarters of the Neubauer firm, at Freyung Square at the corner of Rennweg Street. It was a gray, multi-story, baroque-style palace, with an imposing entrance. A

wide marble staircase with dark mahogany balustrades lead upstairs to a corridor with heavy, dark wooden doors opening into offices and conference rooms.

The work itself proved to be easier than I had anticipated. Most of my work consisted of simple repairs and fell well within the range of my limited competence. Occasionally, this meant simply recommending that the office buy a new gadget or appliance. Although there was a lot of work, I could frequently delegate it to my three young Russian helpers, Natasha, Nadja, and Igor. The problem was that, while they were pleasant and willing, they knew even less than I did.

The office workers in the building were over 90 percent women, just like everywhere else in Vienna, not counting the thousands of foreign workers. For the most part, these women were polite, considerate, educated, and cultured. It was difficult to reconcile the personae of these women here, as we drank our *Ersatztee* or ate lunch together, with the images I carried of their husbands, brothers, and fathers out there, in uniform, often committing unspeakable atrocities.

In these last weeks of the war, as the bombing raids multiplied, so did the daily problems. Everybody appeared to be preoccupied and forever in a hurry, rushing off after work to do the shopping or to take care of a new emergency at home. Each day, after a bombing, some new area of daily activity was affected: there were days when the streetcars would not run; sometimes we returned home and found that the electricity was out, or gas or water was not available. Each interruption was temporary, lasting only a few hours, but every inconvenience had a ripple effect. If the streetcars were not running, for example, I got home late, and by then, the grocery was closed. To me, however, each new inconvenience was a good omen.

Often, while people hurried into the shelters, I went into the street when the sirens were wailing and the bombs were falling just to see the sky blanketed with Allied planes. There were anti-aircraft guns installed on almost every tall building, but by now they were manned by youngsters, literally schoolchildren, with little or no training, and little, if any, success in their task. Not once during these last weeks did I see or hear about an Allied plane being shot down. Sometimes, within my narrow field of view, the sky was almost totally dark, with hundreds of planes flying over. The sight was exhilarating. It meant that an Allied victory was near, and that filled me with great hope—hope for the civilized world, hope for the victory of good over a terrible, terrible evil. It also meant the end of the war and possible salvation for many including, perhaps, the survival of my family.

There was one other new occurrence that was directly related to the ever-increasing bombing raids by the Americans by day and the British by night and which greatly affected my life in Vienna from that time on. We began spending several hours of our working day in shelters—going down two or three times a day. In the shelter the space was cramped and there was nothing to do, so it was easy and common to meet people and strike up conversations. One day, I became acquainted with a young lady by the name of Friedl who usually either was reading a book or helping someone. The day we met, I noticed that she was reading *Ferien vom Ich* (Vacations from Myself) by Keller and in response to my questions she began to tell me about the story. The essential argument of the book, as I remember it now, was that for a therapeutic vacation to be effective, it was not enough to simply change one's surroundings or to just relax. One needed to do the opposite of whatever one was doing in daily life. For example, a medical

doctor should peel potatoes in a field kitchen or a factory worker should take up archeological studies. She was so enthusiastic about the book that I asked to borrow it. It was the first book I had ever tried to read in German and I surprised myself that I managed to do it; perhaps trying harder knowing that it would impress my new friend. When we both tired of reading, we chatted. Friedl's family was of Czech origin, with the name of Dworschak. She told me that she worked in the statistics department of the company and that she liked mathematics even though she did not have a formal education in the field and had only a high-school diploma. We talked about books, operas, movies, and, of course, the war. To my surprise, there was an affinity in our thoughts, similar likes and dislikes. I also liked her appearance; her smile, her high cheekbones, the expression of sincerity in her eyes, and her sunny disposition. I especially found her laugh attractive; it was open, genuine, and spontaneous. And it became contagious. Within a short time, my own smile, even laugh—something I had not done in a long time—became more frequent and natural.

Hardly noticeable at first, our casual acquaintanceship slowly led to flirting: little compliments, timid fleeting glances, and pleasant smiles upon eye contact. One day, when our duties interrupted our chatting, we decided to meet after work at a nearby café. But as our attraction to each other was growing, so was a concern: under the Nazis' wartime rules *fraternisierung* with foreign workers was against the law. We did not know either the scope or the letter of that law or, if it was enforced; but there was the general perception that social mixing was frowned upon by some. This, however, did not deter us. Especially in my case, taking chances was my *modus vivendi* and so, I quickly found a solution. During the day, at work, we exchanged notes by leaving them in the

electrical box next to Friedl's office; in the evenings—which were getting darker earlier with each passing day—we met at a corner a couple blocks away so people from the office would not see us leaving the building together. In general, we decided to disregard the law, prepared to explain, if stopped, that we worked in the same firm and that the meeting was part of that work.

One wintry night stands out in my memory. As I walked Friedl home, after an air raid disabled the public transportation, we came upon an elderly lady in front of us carrying a heavy suitcase. Friedl quickly caught up with the lady and offered to carry the suitcase for her, since we were going in the same direction. It was only a small gesture but it was clear that helping others was in Friedl's character and it made me care for her even more.

On the weekends that followed, we exchanged other books, went to movies, listened to music, and took long walks in the famous Vienna woods. We read poetry by the nineteenth-century Austrian poet, Friedrich Halms. What I always liked best—and still like—about these poems is that they express profound truths in the simplest of terms. Halms wrote, for example:

<i>Rich people and small children</i>	<i>Reiche Leute und kleine Kinder</i>
<i>Have one characteristic in common:</i>	<i>Eines haben sie im gemein</i>
<i>They all think and are sure of</i>	<i>Sie beide meinen, mehr oder minder,</i>
<i>That the world is here only for them!</i>	<i>Die Welt were da fuer sie allein!</i>

or

*In misfortune, many will lament with you;
When the rays of good luck embrace you,
Some may bear it without envy,
But rejoicing, [there] will be only the one who loves you.*

And on happiness:

Happiness means different things to different people; but if I were asked to point the way, I would say:

First love, someone, something; of your choice and pleasure. But love with passion; engulf yourself with that love, give totally of yourself.

Then create; anything of your liking and inclination, in any field or realm. But do it with ardor and enthusiasm; with zeal and fervor; to the limits of your strength and ability.

Then give. The more you give the richer you will be (in the eyes of others).

And then, die. For it is better never to reach the glory happiness and only experience what we once were.

For New Year's Eve, 1944, Friedl prepared a special dinner with all kinds of Viennese dishes and delicacies, including a *Wiener schnitzel* and the famous *Zwetschenknoedle* (a plum inside cake dough and sugared on the outside). At midnight, to the melody of Johannes Strauss' waltzes, we danced. She had to teach me the steps, as this was the first time that I have ever danced. Before the war I was fourteen, attended a boys-only school and social contacts with the opposite sex, like mixed parties, were rare and never organized. Friedl also introduced me to another experience: the opera. The first story she told me was that from *The Flying Dutchman*, by Wagner. She knew well the stories of all great operas.

From that time, I became a frequent guest in her parents' home, almost part of the family; during the last two weeks before the liberation, when life in the inner city became chaotic and unsafe, I stayed in their home. Her family were Social-Democrats, deeply nostalgic for the Austro-Hungarian empire of Francis Joseph and staunchly and openly anti-Nazi. They often lamented the plight and the disappearance of their Jewish friends and neighbors or the sufferings of others. Soon, Friedl and I soon became very close friends, spending time together and enjoying each other's company. By now we were in

love. She was charming, intelligent, and unusually wise. Her feminine grace, her strength of character, and her quiet goodness, all had a considerable influence on my life; we remained special friends for the rest of the war, for the months that I remained in Vienna after the war, and for many, many years thereafter. It was an exceptional and unique friendship.

Friedl was only the second Christian during the war to whom I revealed, with complete confidence, my most guarded secret—that I was Jewish. Just as when I divulged my true identity to Marianne, I did it foremost because I trusted her, and because I felt dishonest not telling her the truth about my family and my background when she was so open about herself. But I also confided in her for a more selfish reason: I needed to unburden myself. What I did not realize then or, to my shame, did not consider then, was that my release created a heavy responsibility for each of them. A burden that had the Gestapo discovered me as a Jew in hiding, could have cost each her life. The Nazis had no mercy for those who knowingly harbored or helped someone who was condemned to be annihilated.

Beginning in April, 1945, two Russian armies, one under the command of Marshal Malinowski and the other under Marshal Tolbuchin, joined to encircle the city of Vienna. The fall of the city was only a matter of days.

Life in the city became even more disorganized and a great number of people, myself included, stopped going to work. For the time being, I continued to stay in Friedl's parents' house, which was in a residential area on the outskirts of the city. Although the outer districts were not subjected to daily bombardments the way the industrial and central parts of the city were, the alarms were citywide—so the entire population spent most of its time in shelters.

In the last days of the war, and in obvious anticipation of Russian entry into Vienna, I noticed that several women were feverishly altering Nazi banners in our shelter, flags that had once been proudly displayed from the fifth or sixth floor windows of a building, reaching all the way down to the first floor. The women now stripped the swastikas and white circles from the banners, leaving solid red material that would later be hung out to welcome the victorious Red Army.

It was a bright, sunny day, the thirteenth day of April. Around mid-morning, as I gazed idly out of a second-story window in Friedl's parents' apartment, I saw two Russian soldiers appear in the street. Instantly, a feeling of euphoria rose within my body. This was the moment of my liberation from the Nazis, after almost six long, tragic years!

The war had finally ended for me. I was free! I had survived!

I turned from the window, and without a word, ran down the staircase as though the building was on fire. I chased after the soldiers and embraced and kissed them both. They stared at me, astonished and speechless. In my excitement, I neither identified myself nor told them why I was so happy.

The next morning I got up very early to go to the Russian headquarters and, despite my lack of military training, volunteer for military service. Unaware that the war

would end in another four weeks, I wanted to do my part. I packed a lunch in my backpack and, to the surprise of my hosts, left the house. On my way, I stopped every officer I met and told each the same story: that I was from the allied country of Poland, that I was a Jew, that I was hiding in Vienna under a false name, and that now I wanted to volunteer to fight the Nazis. And the answer from each one was the same:

“Go to the headquarters.”

“And where is that?” I asked.

“Oh, no! We cannot disclose that. You are a total stranger,” was the standard answer.

Seeing that I was on my own, I started walking in the direction the Russians were coming from. Then I followed the newly strung telephone lines, noticing that the bundles of wires thickened as I got closer to the command post. Finally, three hours later, I found myself explaining the purpose of my visit to a junior officer on the outside perimeter of the Russian headquarters. Suspicious about who I was, he wouldn’t allow me to come close to an officer with any kind of authority. Instead, he determined that they did not need me, did not want me, and further, did not trust me. From the questions this junior officer asked, he insinuated that it would have been impossible for a Jew to survive in Nazi Vienna, much less to have lived in hiding through most of the war, and that therefore I must be a Nazi collaborator seeking to switch sides now that the war was lost.

“The Fascists killed all the Jews,” he stated flatly.

He concluded, with remarkable perceptivity, that he couldn’t rely on my documents to establish my identity either, since, by my own admission, they were false. Certainly, his suspicion about people switching sides was not unfounded. Hundreds of

thousand, perhaps even millions, of foreign laborers in Germany—including the twenty plus Russians and Ukrainians that worked with me at the Neubauer firm—made such a switch as did some German opportunists. Many nationals of the Soviet Republic and Eastern European countries, such as Hungarians or Slovaks, were Nazi collaborators who now wanted to hide their past and they did it by volunteering to serve with the Russian Army. Many Soviets, right after being taken prisoners of war, declared themselves pro-Nazi and formed combat units (battalions, even army units); they often fought together with the Germans against their country of origin. The most famous among them was General Vlasov, a Soviet general who had been a prisoner of war, switched sides, and then formed the Russian Liberation National Army to fight on the German side against the Soviet Union and the Allies. During the last weeks of the war, Vlasov was captured again by the Soviets on the Czechoslovakian front. He was tried as a traitor and quickly executed.

But with respect to my offer to volunteer, the crux of the matter was that the Russians did not want me. Tired and greatly disappointed, I started to trek back. As I approached the center of the city, I noticed more people in the streets than usual and, within seconds, I realized that the stores were being looted. While the Russian soldiers initiated it, the looting was enthusiastically taken up by the local population and stores were being rapidly and completely emptied. Seeing the amount of people involved in this activity, I impulsively decided that one more person would not make such a difference; I crossed the street, walked into one of the department stores, and joined in the looting. I needed so many things, as I had not purchased a new piece of clothing for such a long time. After filling up my little backpack with shirts and underwear, I noticed the shoe

section. Discarding the shirts and underwear, I replaced them with three pairs of boots. Then I saw a roll of wool fabric and took out two pairs of boots to make room for that. After ten minutes of such indecision, I finally ended up with a Tyrolean hat, several pairs of socks, a suit that did not fit me, and a pair of boots that were not my size. My misconduct was not a great success.

In the meantime, the Russian army was inching its way toward the center of the city and the canal. The army looked surprisingly primitive and undisciplined. The infantry was non-motorized, only foot soldiers. Each of these men wore a folded blanket placed diagonally across his chest and a Kalashnikov rifle hung over his shoulder. They were walking singly or in small groups but never marching in a column. The supplies were loaded on horse-driven peasant wagons on solid rubber wheels. Tanks, armored vehicles, and heavy artillery were nowhere to be seen. When night fell, the soldiers sat down on the sidewalk and, leaning against the houses, fell asleep. The modest food provisions, primarily consisting of dry rations or a quarter loaf of dark bread, were carried in a knapsack or a deep coat pocket. Occasionally, the field kitchen would pass by to distribute coffee or soup and some cooked vegetables.

There was little, if any, underground resistance by the Austrians. I had heard of many desertions (a secretary in Neubauer's office confided in me that the Nazis were looking for her soldier husband but that they wouldn't find him) and there were anti-war, anti-Nazi graffiti on walls and bombed-out buildings. I remember one such strophe verbatim:

Wir wollen kein Maler von Gottesgnaden,

Wir wollen kein Fuehrer von Berchtesgaden,

Wir wollen kein Eintopfgericht mit Herring,

Wir wollen so fressen wie Feldmarschall Goering!

(We don't want a painter from God's mercy,

We don't want a leader from Berchtesgaden,

We don't want one-course dinners with herring,

We want to eat like Field Marshal Goering!)

Many voices from within Vienna were clamoring to declare it an “open city” in order to avoid the damage or destruction of its many artistic and cultural treasures. The SS division stationed nearby had other plans, however. Under the command of the notorious Nazi stalwart, Sepp Dietrich, commander of the SS *Leibstandarte* division, they had planned a trap: first, they would let the Russians take the southwestern part of town, almost without a fight. And then they would ambush them as they tried to cross the Danube Canal. At the time, I was completely unaware of this planned ambush. I only knew that I could no longer gain access to my rented room on the German side, which was just one block behind the SS lines.

This area lay south of the Danube River and included the inner city's First district. It extended all the way to the banks of the Danube Canal, and formed a strong line of resistance on the other side of the canal in the Second district, in the northeastern half of the city. The canal itself was a manmade waterway bypassing an elbow in the Danube River. It was over one hundred feet wide, including the embankments, and at least twenty-feet deep. Within the city's center, about eight bridges crossed the canal.

The SS first blew up the canal bridges and then quietly requisitioned all the buildings, each about six stories high, which faced the canal and the inner city. They positioned themselves behind the windows, which were filled with sandbags that camouflaged a machine gun at every casement. They were concentrated particularly in buildings facing the bridges and the streets leading toward the bridges.

Unaware of this SS line of defense on the opposite side of the canal, the Russians sent in an engineering battalion to build pontoon bridges over the ones that had been blown up; this was done at three or four sites. When the bridges were almost complete a large number of troops began to cross. The occupation of the western and southern parts of the city had been uneventful, as the Germans offered no resistance, and it looked like the occupation of this section would be just the same. But this was not to be the case. Once the troops reached the banks of the canal, a concerted barrage of gunfire began, resulting in incredible carnage. From upper windows across the canal, the machine gun fire did not cease until every Russian soldier on the bridge or ready to cross it was dead or gone and all the new bridges destroyed. In a couple of hours, a new battalion of Russian engineers and soldiers arrived, this time under cover, first to remove the bodies and then to reconstruct the bridges. Initially, it appeared that the German defense had subsided—there was intermittent firing but only a few casualties. But, as soon as the freshly assembled soldiers prepared to cross the new bridges, the barrage started anew and again the massacre was as deadly as the previous one. What surprised me most was that the Russian military did not seem to draw the obvious, logical conclusion—that the German defense was overwhelming and that they needed to change their strategy. The odds were unequal, yet the Russians continued sending one wave of troops after another

against the entrenched positions of the *Waffen* SS, with a total disregard for the loss of human life.

Abruptly, one afternoon, after the Russians had finally brought in heavy artillery, the fierce fighting stopped. The SS men abandoned the buildings and withdrew. When the shooting stopped, I was about a block away from the canal, on a side street, Heinrichgasse 4, where Marianne's parents lived, waiting to cross the canal, to get to my rented room and retrieve my few possessions. I started to walk in the direction of a new bridge. As I reached the end of the street, a grotesque sight met my eyes, beyond all imagination: the sidewalk, the road, the tree-lined walkway, and the concrete embankment—a strip about seventy feet in width—was covered with the bloodied bodies of Russian soldiers. At first, I found small spaces to step in-between the bodies, but the number of corpses continued to increase as I got closer to the bridge. Finally, it was impossible to avoid stepping on the dead, as they lay in pools of their own blood, in layers of two to three deep. Soon thereafter, a new column of soldiers arrived for the task of body removal and burial.

I managed to cross the canal and reached the house with my rented room. When I entered, I was surprised to find my landlords unusually excited and cheerful. They were generally sullen and never particularly friendly toward me. We had never exchanged information about each other and certainly never discussed war or politics. My dislike of them was primarily motivated by their very mysterious behavior, which always made me wonder whether they were Nazis or Nazi sympathizers; whether they disliked foreigners, Poles or just me. I also wondered why my landlord was not in the army, since he looked fit and healthy and was only in his early fifties. Now they told me that they were planning

to move to a nicer apartment in a better section of town, and wanted to know if I would like to move with them. Despite my misgivings about them, I, nevertheless, immediately agreed to this unexpected offer.

A month or two before the Russians arrived, my landlords' sixteen-year-old son had joined the SS *Wehrwolf*, a sort of "cannon fodder of last resort." I did not know if he had volunteered or was drafted into the SS service as the Nazis, in their desperation at losing the war, conscripted boys as young as fourteen and fifteen years old into the SS. Whenever he visited his home, he, the SS man, and I, the Jew, slept in adjacent rooms. The idea of sharing an apartment with an SS man and having to see—however occasionally—that hated uniform up close, filled me with disgust.

As for the parents, not long after Vienna fell, the mystery of their political affiliation was solved: my landlord revealed that he had always been, and still was, a Communist, and that he had just re-joined the fledgling Austrian Communist Party. That affiliation was the reason he was receiving all kinds of privileges, among them, a better apartment. After a few weeks we had all moved to the ground floor of Donaustrasse 9, a quite elegantly furnished apartment abandoned by a Nazi official who had fled the city.

In the first weeks following the Russian takeover of Vienna, a number of events took place in fast succession. The very first day after it was officially announced that Vienna was now under a new authority, the "Russian *Komendatura*," I went in search of other Jews, to seek out others who had possibly survived. Although I often thought that I was

the only Jewish survivor in Vienna, some inner voice told me that I might be wrong and that I should find out. I walked to the place where Vienna's main synagogue had once stood, in the First district, in the area of Judengasse and Judenplatz.

When I reached the synagogue site—which by now was nothing but a pile of rubble with twisted steel beams sticking out in all directions—I found at least twenty other Jews roaming around who had endured in one way or another and now, just like me, were looking for other Jews. Most were natives of Vienna who had managed to survive the entire war, some even with the tacit approval of the authorities. One of them claimed to be a rabbi; another happened to be from Warsaw. The latter had been captured during the Warsaw Uprising and brought here the same way I had been. He was quite a few years older than I—around forty—but we were drawn to each other, perhaps because of the great similarity of our experiences, and, quickly, we became friends. Ivo Vesby was the former musician with the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra. I visited him many times in Vienna and frequently spent the night in his apartment near the Opera House when it was late and I did not want to walk to my distant home. Later, I met him in Lodz on one of my brief post-war trips to Poland and, in the 1950s, we met a couple of times in New York, where he had settled after reuniting with his Polish wife and teenage daughter.

Ivo was not only musically talented, bright, and intelligent, he also had a dry and biting wit. When we met in Lodz, we found ourselves with a group of his friends some of whom were discussing and exalting the virtues of the newly installed Communist regime. After one of the regime's fanatic adherents sat down, Ivo took the floor. He asked the speaker if, under the new regime, one would be free to express one's wishes.

“Of course, of course!” the speaker responded.

“In that case, my wish is to be wherever, anywhere, that you are not!”

There was a sound applause, and I whole-heartedly shared Ivo’s sentiments.

A few days after the liberation, the Viennese *Israelitische Kultusgemeinde* (Jewish Community), opened its doors. I rushed in to register—not only did I want to officially join the Jewish community, I also decided to register for emigration to Palestine. But most importantly, more than anything else, I wanted to establish my true identity as Zenon Neumark, no longer to be known as Zenon Matysiak. In the next few weeks, I made a point of informing my friends, associates and anyone I met, of my true name and heritage. This trivial switch of my last name, at last, conferred upon me complete freedom.

Among the things I witnessed during the first days after liberation, was the general lack of discipline among the ordinary Russian soldiers: there was looting of both homes and stores, and the indiscriminate raping of women. It appeared that the primary objectives of the Russian soldiers were rape, plunder, and vodka. It was rumored then, and later reports confirmed, that for the first few days the Russian commanders granted the victorious front-line soldiers total “freedom of behavior,” to compensate them for their great sacrifices and as a reward for their final success in conquering the city.

The incidents of women being raped were so frequent that my friends, the Kauschlers, asked me to accompany their daughter Marianne from their home in the inner

city to stay in a relative's home in the suburbs. While we managed to reach our destination several kilometers away by foot, the trip was not without incidents. On the way, we were stopped several times by soldiers and lower ranking officers demanding that Marianne go with them. Only my insistence that I was a Pole, an ally and not an enemy, my plea that Marianne was my girlfriend, and the documents that showed my Polish nationality, helped me manage each time to dissuade the soldiers from taking her.

A few days after the liberation, I stopped by my old firm. There I found that most of the Russian employees who lodged there were continuously drunk. The younger women proudly showed off "gifts" that their new Russian boyfriends had stolen. Watches seemed to have been their preferred booty. Natasha, one of the prettier and better-educated girls, pulled up both her sleeves to display the row of watches on each of her arms.

Bombed out tram equipment and tracks, and the lack of electrical power made a mess of the otherwise well-functioning Vienna public transportation system. Fortunately, I found a black military bicycle on a narrow, quiet street near my house that a retreating German soldier must have abandoned and, repeating an earlier escapade, I took it. In the absence of public transportation, bicycles quickly were a precious commodity and I felt fortunate to have one. But not for long. One day, I was riding on the Kaertnerstrasse, in the center of town, when a Russian soldier stopped me and asked for the bicycle. I refused, in Russian, on the grounds that I was a Pole, an ally of Russia and, hence, not subject to freelance requisitioning (a euphemism for plundering), as any Austrian might be. We argued for a while until he became impatient, and pointed to an officer walking along the sidewalk, about fifty feet away. "Argue with him," he said, explaining that it

was that officer who had ordered my bicycle to be taken from me. I ran over to the officer to get him to change his mind, but he had no idea what I was talking about; he had never given such an order. When I turned around to reclaim my transportation, I saw the soldier riding it off in the opposite direction, already a block away. My bicycle was lost.

The common joke in Vienna at the time was that Stalin made two major mistakes: first, to show Europe to the Russian soldier; and second, to show the Russian soldiers to Europe!

Despite the chaos of liberation, day by day, life in Vienna was becoming more bearable and normal. After the liberation, Mr. Neubauer was nowhere to be found and the firm closed its doors. Luckily, my limited knowledge of Russian came in quite handy and I got a temporary job with a unit of the Russian army as a German-Russian translator. As I continued to obtain jobs for which I was utterly unqualified, I began to feel as though I was becoming a specialist in incompetence.

The looting stopped and all utilities were functioning again. All sorts of cultural events and a variety of entertainment were revived. Within a week or so, there were concerts, chorales, folklore dance performances, and plays, mostly by the Viennese, but also by the Russian occupying forces and their recreation groups. There were several times when I saw three formal performances in the course of one day, and then took part in spontaneous street singing and dancing between each event. The street events usually started with Russian soldiers performing some folk dance, like the “Hopak,” or singing and clapping to tunes played on an accordion or a balalaika. I liked the old Russian folk tunes and even knew some of the lyrics; I had grown up with similar music and it took me back to my happy youth.

The scenes invariably ended with spontaneous dancing, especially when Strauss waltzes were played. At first, only soldiers danced, but, slowly, the local girls and women accepted invitations and soon everybody participated. This reflected both the love for art and music for which Vienna was so well known and a tremendous, pent up hunger for entertainment and recreation. This freedom of expression confirmed that indeed, we were free at last and hopefully free forever. I don't know how it happened but only a few days after the Russians took over the city, all the theaters, concert halls and cinemas opened their doors and were immediately filled. One of the more outstanding performances I remember was *Elektra*, with a libretto by Hugo von Hofmannstahl and music by Richard Strauss. Soon thereafter, I saw my first American film: "It Happened Tomorrow." Unfortunately, it was in English and I understood very little of it.

While the end of the war was a dream come true for most people, many, including myself, were ill prepared for it. The prospect of having to face the reality of the terrible losses—both human and material—that survivors suffered during the war years was an emotional shock. For me, now that I was no longer preoccupied with survival, feelings of grief, loneliness, and uncertainty about the future surfaced. The instinctive desire to survive, which had guided and driven me until now, was suddenly no longer central to my life. And there was nothing equivalent to take its place—at least, nothing I could define or foresee.

I was now faced with starting a new life with no education, no money, no home or country and, perhaps, entirely alone. Where were my parents, my sister, my family? Where were my friends and the world of happiness and security I grew up in? Where to go and what to do? How to catch up on lost education? How to start building a normal life? I was still strong and healthy, and, at least, I had places where I could stay and be fed: both Friedl's and Marianne's families offered me a place in their homes. Also, there were several organizations, such as the Red Cross and the UN Refugee Relief Organization, that dispensed free meals and provided other assistance, if necessary. But although my immediate needs were not a problem, I also felt numb, confused, and very uncertain about my future.

The fact that in Austria I revealed my identity to two women, Marianne and Friedl, was first and foremost a sign that I trusted these two individuals. But it was also more: it was a sign of the sense of safety that I felt in Vienna, in contrast to the constant fear I had felt in Poland. It is ironic that in the city where only a few, short years earlier the population had voted a resounding "Yes" to the union with Nazi Germany, the city where the Nazi party had been the second strongest party before the *Anschluss*, the city that had been home to many war criminals, I had acquired a sense of safety that eluded me in my native Poland.

Vienna, and perhaps all of Austria, as it turned out, was one of the safest places in Central and Eastern Europe for a Jew to hide. As so few Jews chose to hide there (probably fewer than a hundred). Because of that, and because tens of thousands of foreign workers of diverse ethnicity lived there, the Vienna Nazis neither expected nor looked for Jews among them.

If this had been known, many other escapees, perhaps thousands, could have hid and survived here. But unfortunately, this is the kind of knowledge gained only through the advantage of hindsight.

Chapter 23: RETURN TO REALITY

The time to face the post-war reality came sooner than I had expected. My first thought was not to go back to Poland, at least not yet, but to stay in Vienna a while longer in order to regain my bearings. The prospect of facing the truth was frightening. But, I quickly realized that there was no other choice; I had to go back, at least for a week or two. The preparations were simple: my backpack and briefcase filled with clothing, food for the road and, for bartering purposes, a bottle of vodka. The more difficult problem was finding transportation. The only means available at that time was hitchhiking, either with peasants or on Russian military trucks. The peasants could provide transportation for only short distances and their vehicles were slow. The Russian truck drivers knew only the general direction of their travel; their time of departure, the route to be taken and destination, were left undetermined. These details were either unknown to them or secret. One Sunday morning in late May, accompanied by Friedl, I set out for my point of departure—Sweden Square in the third district of Vienna. We said a brief good-bye, she wished me a good trip, and left. As she walked away I noticed her wiping her eyes with a handkerchief.

The road that branched off Sweden Square led to the northeast, the direction of Poland and was a general assembly area for Russians who were leaving Vienna. Many trucks made temporary stops there and I set about trying to find a truck driver going in my direction who would give me a ride. My semi-fluent Russian came in handy, but the bottle of vodka I had purchased the day before was even more helpful in this quest.

The covered truck bed had benches on each side and I joined the soldiers in the back of the truck so as not to be visible from the outside. The soldiers were a friendly bunch, in good spirits because the war was over, they were alive, and they were going east toward their homeland. They offered to share with me what little they had—from cigarettes, to bread, to American chocolate bars.

The truck I was on was part of a long convoy of trucks, each full of soldiers. There was a great deal of confusion organizing the departure so that it was early evening by the time we finally started moving. We were only about two or three hours out of the city when the convoy stopped in a lightly wooded area. The soldiers were ordered to get off the trucks and set up camp for the night. As far as I could tell, I was the only civilian in the camp but that did not seem to concern anyone. I followed my truck companions, trying to be both helpful—clearing an area, collecting branches for a fire—and inconspicuous. Some food provisions were distributed, including a sort of soup, which each group had to heat up.

About the time everyone was getting ready to turn in for the night, a senior Russian officer casually wandered into our compound. He was quite jovial as he exchanged pleasantries and backslapping with other soldiers and junior officers. Then, suddenly his eyes focused on me and his face grew serious. He turned to me and asked sharply: “And who are you?” His voice has a menacing undertone that unnerved me but I managed to answer, giving him my name, nationality, and my religious background. “*Ja Neumark, Jewrei z Polszy,*” I answered. I told him the circumstances that brought me to Vienna and told him I was trying to go back to my home country, Poland.

He listened, ominously silent, and then asked to see my documents. I pulled out my wallet and laid all the relevant papers before him. I did not think about it at the time but he noticed immediately that I had two sets of documents. One was my Polish ID card under the name Matysiak. The other one was from the Jewish Community Office in Vienna, with my original family name, Neumark. My fervent attempt to explain the two names was cut short. Instead, he wanted to see the rest of the contents of my wallet. Most of it was insignificant except for one piece of paper, which he carefully unfolded. It was a hand-drawn map featuring a winding road, a few localities, a railroad crossing, a wooded area, and a dashed line denoted as the front line. The last little circle on the map had the name Rembertow next to it. I quickly explained that it was an old map of an area near Warsaw, drawn during the Warsaw Uprising, when I was trying to cross the frontline to the Russian side. But my explanations did not satisfy the officer. He studied my papers, including the map, and then asked if I had worked for the Germans. “Yes” I answered, “I was an electrician at the Neubauer firm, in Vienna.” “No, no. Did you *collaborate* with the Germans?” he clarified. Finally, I understood what he was getting at. It struck me as such a preposterous idea that I had served the Nazis in the war or that I was now a spy. I restated my background and added proudly that during the war I was in the Polish Resistance, neither of which impressed him. Only later did I realize that the Russians viewed belonging to the Polish Resistance as a negative because part of the Polish Resistance was ultra-nationalistic and considered Russia an archenemy.

The officer returned my documents, said something to the effect that civilians were not allowed in a military camp area, and then walked away. By that time it was past ten o’clock and most of the soldiers were already asleep.

Soon after I fell asleep, I was awakened by a commotion and then a flashlight beam shone directly on me. My name was called out. When I opened my eyes, there were two soldiers in front of me, carbines mounted with bayonets hanging over their shoulders. “Come with us,” they ordered. Quickly, I collected my things and was escorted by them through the forest. An image of me, tied to a tree and blindfolded, facing a firing squad crossed my mind. Surely they would not kill me, I thought. After all that I have been through, and now, when the war was about to end, why would they kill me? I panicked I might die there in the forest without anyone ever knowing why or what had happened to me. With a soldier on each side of me, we walked in silence. When I asked the soldiers what was going to happen to me, the only answer I received was “Keep going.” After what seemed like an eternity, but was probably only about thirty minutes, we reached a country road and stopped. The night seemed strangely still. I looked at the soldiers, my executioners, and waited for them to reach for their weapons. But, instead, they pointed which the direction that I should go and told me not to show myself again.

Without hesitation, I started to run in the direction they pointed away from the encampment, not sure if this was some sort of trick or another lucky escape. When I was certain that they were no longer in sight, relieved, I stopped to catch my breath. I continued on, although I slackened my pace, and, after about an hour, I noticed a flickering light through the trees, then several lights. I walked faster and soon reached a village. Knocking at a few doors and confronting a few sleepy residents, I encountered a new problem: I was in a place where the residents spoke a language that I could not make out. It was Hungarian, a Finno-Ugric language, not related to any of the three main families of languages, Anglo-Saxon, Romance and Slavic, spoken in Europe. Then, a

woman remembered that one old man in the village who had served in the Austro-Hungarian army during World War I and spoke German. She took me to him and, there, I got lodging for the rest of the night and a promise to be taken in the morning to the nearest rail station in Bratislava, Slovakia by horse and buggy.

A few hours later I was traveling on a freight train, with a long line of open cars loaded with wide, thick boards, pulled by a steam locomotive. Its destination was Katowice, Poland. I was the only “passenger,” and so stretched myself out flat on my stomach on top of the boards. It was almost summer and the day was sunny and warm. But as the sun started to set and the train accelerated, the cold winds made me shiver. I decided to move to the front of the train, closer to the engine. I crawled forward to the edge of the car, crossed to the next car, and then to the next car again. I continued traversing the cars, until the white, warm steam from the locomotive engulfed my cold body. I congratulated myself on having such a brilliant idea. Content, I bathed in the moist, warm air until we arrived at our end-station, Katowice. When I reached the station, I noticed that people were looking at me strangely. Ignoring the stares, I went to the bathroom to freshen up after the journey. As I casually turned towards the mirror, I could hardly believe my eyes: I was pitch black! I looked like a chimney sweep.

I spent the night in a Red Cross shelter for homebound repatriates and the next morning set out to reach my goals: Lodz, Warsaw, and Tomaszow. When I arrived in my hometown of Lodz, I realized that at last I would have to confront the reality of learning the fate of my family. The overwhelming feeling of pain in facing this reality could not be lessened by the faint but pleasant memories of my childhood here.

The first place I went to was the Jewish Community Center. The place swarmed with distraught, dazed people, who, like myself, were looking for others that they knew would not be found. The walls were plastered with little notes, scribbled on light and dark pieces of odd-shaped paper, in different languages, in cursive or print, but all with a common denominator: names in large, bold letters with a plea for news, any news, about their loved ones. Notes gave details of the persons being sought; their physical descriptions, and places where they were last seen. Some notes had pictures of children, wives, husbands, sometimes an entire family. The saddest notes were those without pictures that ended with “last seen...” and a place and a date. It struck me also that many of the notes had signatures and a plea to be contacted, but with no return address or location, just a name, as most people here were just passing through. They had no mailing address: they had no home; they belonged to no city; they did not even have a home country.

Through the Center I found that Marysia was alive and was now living in Lodz. Through her I learned my Aunt Mania perished behind the Warsaw Ghetto walls and that while Marta survived the encounter with the Gestapo, she also died a few months later during the Warsaw Uprising, under unknown circumstances. But my Uncle Jozef had survived the Lodz Ghetto and was also now in Lodz, reunited with his wife, Stenia. I found both of them without difficulty. Wladek, I learned, also died during the Uprising. As a soldier of the *Miecz i Plug* (which was, by that time, incorporated into the *Armja Krajowa*), he died in an attack on the German police headquarters on Malachowskiego Square in the first few days of the rebellion. He proved himself, yet again, a dedicated

patriot, a brave warrior and a hero in the fight against the Nazis. For his valor and bravery, many years later, Wladek was posthumously awarded several medals.

During my stay in Lodz, I received one hopeful report. I learned that my sister Rena may have possibly survived the war. Some concentration camp inmates who knew her in the Lodz Ghetto and were now back in their hometown provided sketchy but encouraging information. The problem now was to find her.

Thousands of survivors of the various concentration camps, many sick and weak, had to remain in Germany to recover and reorient themselves. They were now placed in several Displaced Persons (DP) camps under the auspices of the Allied Forces in various locations throughout occupied Germany.

I did not visit the house where I had lived, or my gymnasium, or the park nearby where I used to play with my friends. I was not strong enough.

I decided to spend the next two days in Warsaw. I had become very fond of this city where, in a short fifteen months, I had lived through the most momentous and extraordinary experiences of my entire life. I remembered Warsaw as a beautiful city, but for me, the attraction of the city was more than its physical beauty; I felt an emotional attachment to Warsaw. When I stepped out of the main railway station onto the familiar Marszalkowska Street, I felt pain and sorrow at the sight of the city in ruin. The devastation was total, absolute. When I had left it a year ago in the very midst of the Warsaw Uprising, it was ablaze and engulfed in a sea of dark smoke, being bombed from the air and systematically burned, block by block, by *Feuerwerfer* canons on the ground. I did not expect that much would be left, yet, now, seeing nothing but rows and rows of

skeleton walls and piles of rubble several stories high, I could not believe my eyes. The destruction was beyond imagination.

Rebuilding had already begun, however; in fact, it was in full swing. Restoring the transportation system, including clearing the roads and restoring the bridges across the Vistula, had the highest priority. That's why the rail station was functioning; that's why there were busses and private cars offering their services. That is also why I was able to get to Praga—on the right side of the Vistula, which was relatively untouched by the Uprising, where the Jewish Committee was operating.

As I was standing in line at the information desk, out of the corner of my eye I saw a young woman suddenly jump over a couple of chairs and I heard my name called out. It was Krysia. We embraced and kissed and held each other for a long, long time, excited and happy to see each other, and, above all, overjoyed to know that we both had survived the war. We exchanged a few personal tidbits about our current status and whereabouts. She told me that her mother and Henryk, her fiancée and now her husband, were with her in Warsaw. She also told me, and apologized, that she had stolen my bicycle, the one I had appropriated from the *Baustelle* and which I had left at my apartment on Kiprow Street, in Grochow. She presented herself to the landlady as my cousin, with a mandate from me to retrieve the bicycle, and the landlady let her have it. I told Krysia that I now lived in Vienna, that I had no plans to stay in Poland or, for that matter, any plans for the future, except to find my sister. After awhile Krysia was called back to work and we left each other without a proper good-bye, without arranging another meeting and without exchanging addresses. We both assumed that we'd see each other in a day or two, or a week at most. But that did not happen because in the

excitement of the moment, we forgot to exchange our current last names—our *real*, current names.

After spending a few more days in Lodz looking, without success, for news about my sister Rena I went back to Vienna, my new temporary home; the only place where I had an address. A few weeks later I left Vienna again to return to Lodz with the hope of finding more information about Rena, or at least hoping to get some clues on how to continue my search. Before leaving, I sent a letter to my Uncle Enrico, in Milan, telling him that I was alone and searching for family members; that I had no plans for the future but I wanted to continue my education. I sent the letter to his pre-war address, not knowing if he was even alive as during the latter part of the war, the Nazis had also occupied most of Italy, including his hometown.

In Lodz, a surprise awaited me: while I was back in Vienna, my sister had visited Lodz in search of me. Not finding me there, she went back to her temporary home in a DP camp, in northern Germany. No one knew where exactly in Germany but I was now eager to track her down as soon as possible.

I did not intend to go back to Tomaszow. It offered nothing to me now except sad memories and a city without family or friends, dilapidated remnants of the ghetto and the camp. Yet, like a criminal drawn to the scene of his crime, I was pulled back, just for a last look, perhaps the last one forever. In my case, not all the memories turned out to be sad. On returning to Tomaszow, I remembered family gatherings for holidays and occasionally for winter or summer vacations. I remembered them as happy times, amidst warm and loving grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

From the railway station, I went straight to Piekarska Street, the main street of the small Tomaszow labor camp, the place where I planned my escape; where my odyssey into the unknown had started. The area looked like a ghost town. It had almost the same contours as when I had left it, except for the high weeds sprouting from every patch of soil and creeping out of nooks and cracks between the rocks. Everything was still, empty; not a soul in sight. But then I noticed the silhouette of someone sitting on a rock, bent over, his forearm under his chin, motionless, like Rodin's *Thinker*.

As I moved closer I could hardly believe my eyes—it was Ignac! Drawn back to Tomaszow by the same inner need that compelled me to return, we both arrived at the same place, the cradle of our escape conspiracy, at the very same time. The last time I had heard from Ignac he was in Riga, almost a year earlier. With tears in our eyes, we embraced. We remained silent for a long, long time, each buried in our own thoughts and memories. In silence, we embraced again. We were both alive!

With our “Mission to Survive,” accomplished, we pondered what to do next. To start with, we decided that together we would head back to Lodz, now the temporary capital of the country and a center for refugees and survivors. We were both hoping against hope that we might encounter a family member, a lost friend, or a neighbor.

With each passing day as we stayed together, Ignac and I began to realize the losses we had both suffered, the ruin that the war had brought about; not only the ruin of the past, or deprivations of the present, but also the problems it created in planning for a new future. The depth of each loss was beyond anyone's ability to comprehend. In the preface to the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz's epic *Pan Tadeusz*, he writes: “*Motherland, you are like health, how to prize you, alone can tell who has lost you.*”

Yet, there was no alternative but to face the challenges ahead of us: To start life anew. The question was how. How does one mend something broken into a thousand pieces, with the main elements irretrievably lost? Where does one learn to do this? How does one begin life anew?

I did not have any idea how to start or where to live or what to do next. But two notions for the future began to crystallize. One was to pursue my education as soon as possible, in spite of the six-year gap in time. The second decision was to leave Poland and search for a new homeland. Ignac had arrived at similar conclusions and so, once again, we joined forces on the road to a new life and into a New World.

Before we could start, there were the immediate difficulties at hand. In my case, it was the task of finding my sister. Similarly, Ignac was looking for his brother Heniek who, he found out, had settled in Poland in order finish his studies in medicine. After settling some mundane odds and ends in Poland, we embarked on a journey that would keep us together for the next two years, through several countries and many new experiences.

Before leaving Lodz, we were joined by Hela, a young Jewess from Germany. She was Roman's friend and I had known her in wartime Warsaw. She wanted to leave Poland to reach her two sisters in the Western Hemisphere: one was living in Cuba and the other in South America. She asked us to take her with us and, so, the three of us went from Poland back to Austria for a few days' stay. I wanted to say a last good-bye to Friedl, Marianne, their parents and a few newly acquired friends such as Ivo Vesby. I also had to collect and pack my few worldly possessions. At home, I also found mail: a letter from my Uncle Enrico. Back at his old home in Milan, he invited me to come and stay

with him, and offered to help with my education. I immediately accepted, but explained that first I had to search for Rena and after that there might be problems crossing the border into Italy. “But we’ll be there!” I told him in my letter. Inadvertently, in my excitement, I neglected to mention who or how many the “we” represented.

Then we were off to Germany. I found Rena in Belsen-Bergen, her last concentration camp and now a DP camp. After five years of separation, we almost did not recognize each other. Our meeting was tearful but silent. Later, I found out that out of the twenty letters that I had thrown into the ghetto, two were delivered to my home by kind passersby. Rena told me about the excitement and the joy my family felt, and the tears they cried—the news that I was alive. It was now, with my reunion with my sister, that I realized the fate of my parents as Rena was the last one to see them, in Auschwitz. I finally understood that I would never see them again.

The four of us, Rena, Hela, Ignac, and I, traveled back to Austria on the way to our final destination: Italy. This took several attempts, including an unsuccessful illegal border crossing on foot; efforts to bribe Italian prisoners of war on their way home to take us along as family; attempts to hide in Allied military trucks and quickly being discovered, and paying professional Austrian smugglers in advance to help us cross, who then never showed up. In the end, an *aliya*¹⁵ brought us to Milan.

It was on a cold February evening at about seven o’clock when the four of us, each loaded with a backpack and with a suitcase in each hand, trotted over the short distance between Milan’s Stazione Centrale and via Scarlatti 27. We reached the address in minutes. It was an imposing multi-story building, dark gray, with a large entrance gate. The concierge, peeking from behind a glass window on the side of the gate, seemed

¹⁵ A group of Jewish emigrants on the way to Palestine.

amazed at the sight of us. I don't think he had ever seen such a ragged group of travelers visiting any of his tenants in this upscale apartment building, especially not Signor Enrico, a well-to-do bachelor tenant of some twenty years. But the concierge's bewilderment paled compared to my uncle's expression when the four of us appeared at his door. "Four unexpected stragglers! Didn't I invite just *one* nephew?" Nonetheless, he welcomed us warmly.

Exhausted and starving, we got there just in time for supper. And our appetites were never more ready for it.

THE END

EPILOGUE

“The secret city of the (Aryan) Jews of Warsaw, in 1940-45, was in short a remarkable achievement, made possible by the initiative, courage, and perseverance of the Jews, and the heroic altruism of some Poles... It casts an unfamiliar light on the Holocaust as a whole and as an excursion into the uncharted continent of evasion as a response to the Holocaust, it is a phenomenon well worth further reflection and study.”

G.S. Paulsson in “The Secret City.”

In the spring of 1993 I flew to Warsaw, Poland to attend the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. I also hoped to encounter some old, wartime comrades: fifty years had past, and if I didn't see them now, it was unlikely that I would ever see them. After I had settled comfortably in my seat in the half-empty plane, however, I realized that there was more on my agenda. For the past few years, I had been searching for something else, something whose exact nature had eluded me. But now, as I closed my eyes, it finally came to me: I wanted to revisit my past.

Ludwik, my friend from the Tomaszow ghetto and the Aryan side of Warsaw, awaited me at the airport. Older, a little haggard and disoriented, but also, as always, brilliant and warm, he showered me with words of welcome. He had already written to say that, as happy as he would be to see me, he wouldn't invite me to his house.

“I live in the slums,” he wrote. A lawyer by education, a lecturer in history at the Polish Military Academy with the rank of a colonel, and now a free-lance journalist, he was poor and lonely. “I feel no longer needed, by anyone, anywhere...” he explained sadly when we have reunited.

In the Victoria Hotel, located in the center of town where many of the anniversary activities were to be held, hundreds of people milled about in the large, elegant lobby. Outside, Polish and Israeli flags fluttered in the light spring breezes in front of the hotel and around adjoining buildings. I rushed to the tourist desk to see the program. It was packed; from morning to evening, for three solid days. Didn't they have lunch breaks in Poland, I wondered?

The ceremonies of the next few days were unbelievable: beautiful, well organized and deeply moving—a truly unique experience. A parade of Polish, Israeli, and other foreign dignitaries, including the prime minister and the primate of the Catholic church of Poland, laid wreaths at the foot of the imposing, thirty-six-foot-high monument to the Heroes of the Ghetto Uprising. There were ceremonies at the Jewish cemetery; a play by Julian Tuwim and Yitzhak Kacenelson, *We, Polish Jews*, performed by the Kaminska Jewish State Theater of Warsaw; a performance of Yiddish songs by Slawa Przybylska (a Polish Catholic singer), and other festivities. But all these paled in comparison with the main and final event, which was held on the evening of April 19. After sunset, as darkness fell and total silence engulfed Anielewicz Square,¹⁶ hundreds of boy scouts distributed lighted candles. We waited in anticipation. The square was then filled with the sound of the Polish army band playing the Polish national anthem and then *Hatikva*, Israel's anthem; city and government officials welcomed us, followed by speeches by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (in Hebrew) and by President Walesa (translated into Hebrew). Afterwards, a choir sang Jewish partisan songs in Yiddish, and finally, the chief rabbi of Israel incanted *El Maleh Rahamim*, the prayer for the dead. In the midst of

¹⁶ Named after Mordecai Anielewicz, the twenty-three-year-old commander of the ZOB and of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

darkness, illuminated by a sea of lighted candles held by tens of thousands of people around the ghetto heroes' monument, six columns glowed brightly. It was an evening to remember.

In the days that followed, I spent a lot of time by myself, reminiscing about my youth in wartime Warsaw as a Catholic Pole: I visited the places where I lived or worked; traveled on trams I used to take; or sat at the window in the familiar, corner coffee shop at the Polonia Hotel. I had plenty of time to think about the people who had influenced me, and the many events that had shaped my life since the end of war.

In 1946, in Milan, Italy, determined to continue my education, I enrolled in the electrical engineering department at the renowned Politecnico di Milano. It was a challenging undertaking. Major gaps in my secondary education, language barriers, and constant harassment by Politecnico's administrators demanding a high school diploma were all serious problems, but gradually, and with the generous financial help of Uncle Enrico, were eventually solved. About five years later—just one year short of getting a *Dottore in Ingegneria*—I had the opportunity to complete my studies at the University of Oklahoma, on a scholarship. Although at first I declined, I really had no choice: the UNRRA (an organization aiding war refugees) had an agreement with the Italian government that within a five-year period all refugees would find permanent homes elsewhere. With some trepidation about facing a new unknown, I packed my bags (text books, some copy-books, and a bicycle) and moved to the United States. I adjusted quickly, though. After all, for me, unknowns were almost normal and always expected.

After obtaining a BS degree in engineering from the University of Oklahoma, and then a graduate degree in physics from the University of California, Los Angeles, I

embarked on a professional career. With my wife Irene and our two young daughters, Arianne and Karin, I settled happily in sunny California. Here I pursued an interesting, productive, and rewarding career for more than forty years in the aerospace industry, working with a variety of technologies, and on a number of major defense and space programs.

In the years following the war, I had a persistent desire to reconnect with people who were either my old friends, people who had helped me, or those with whom I had crossed paths during the difficult times of the war. I felt a special affection, a special bond, with them. I was particularly interested in finding those who had helped me survive—to thank them face to face, and, if I could, offer help. Over the years, I made an effort to locate them. My success rate was mixed. I did find some, but failed to find others. With some, such as Roman, Stasiek, and Heniek, I remain in touch to this day; with others, such as Ignac and Krysia, I stayed in contact until their passing. By the time I found some of those who had helped me, it was too late.

Only after the war did I find out from Heniek what happened to the leader of AKIBA, Yitzhak Rosenblat, the person who played such important part in inspiring me to take action. My survival had its origin in the AKIBA experience: the wise and inspirational leadership of Yitzhak, the vision of the group to fight back, and the readiness of each member to sacrifice his or her life for the cause. As Heniek related to me, after their arrival at the Auschwitz camp, an SS officer ordered the newly-arrived Tomaszow men to take off their clothing, and began selecting those able to work. All inmates quickly obeyed, except one: Yitzhak. He hesitated. He was afraid to expose his

thinner and shorter left leg, the consequence of the polio he had suffered in his childhood. That hesitation sealed his fate. He was immediately ordered to the side of the condemned. Fully aware of what this meant, he turned briefly to Heniek and said, "If, by chance you see my brother, tell him what happened to me," and calmly went to his death.

On my first trip to Vienna after the war, in 1957, I visited Mr. Neubauer's electrical firm—now smaller and in a new location—to tell him my true identity and to inquire about Mrs. Follman. While pretending to be friendly, it was clear that he felt very uncomfortable, probably wondering what the real purpose of my visit was. To my revelation that I was Jewish he lied shamelessly by saying, "These questions never mattered to me." And no, he did not know the whereabouts of Mrs. Follman.

To my greatest regret, I never saw Mrs. Szewczykowa again. In the mid-1970s, I visited Poland, and sought her out. I had hoped to embrace her and thank her for being such a trusted friend, but it was too late; she had passed on. I still feel guilty for not finding her in time to say thank you. Even though I knew how to find her house, I had never registered the name of her street or number of her home in my memory, so I could not write to her.

In 1977, on a trip to Warsaw with my sister Rena, I visited all the old places where I once had lived, or places which had special meaning for me. Among others, I went to Osowska 37 to visit my old landlords, Helena and Zbig. They and their house were no longer there, but a neighbor suggested that I check with a lady living nearby who had been their friend. When I knocked on the door, a mature woman about fifty opened it. She invited me in, was pleasant, but informed me that she did not know what had happened to my former landlords; they had moved away many years back. Then I

inquired if she knew, by chance, any of their wartime friends, specifically a young and pretty girl, a niece of the local priest. The lady looked at me, opened her mouth, and froze. She almost fell off the chair. “But this must be me!” Zosia exclaimed.

Slowly, the images of a long lost past came to life. She remembered me; she remembered the Easter dinner and the breakfast the following morning at the parish. We tried to catch up on each other’s lives during the last thirty-some years. During our conversation, one question did not leave my mind and I had to ask. Did they, the landlords, or she or other neighbors, know who I really was? “Did you talk about the Jews? Did you wonder about me or anyone else who was new to the neighborhood, who he or she might be?” Zosia thought for a while, and then answered, “I think that we had a suspicion but we were not sure. We were young and did not much think about it. We also did not fully realize what was happening to the Jews,” she added apologetically.

We also visited my old home in Grochow on Kiprow Street again, where we found the husband of my former landlady at home. He knew all about the story of the “grenades and revolver in the oven,” in fact, the whole neighborhood knew about it. The one thing he did not know was that, while he was in a prisoner-of-war camp, his wife was in another kind of danger: she was harboring—although unbeknownst to her—a Jew.

My worries about leaving the grenades in the oven were somewhat mitigated by knowing that good housekeepers, like my landlady, always clear the oven before lighting it.

I then traveled to Germany to find Paul Biebow, the German who had befriended me on my first job outside the Tomaszow Ghetto. All I knew was his full name and that he lived somewhere *near* Luebeck, a northern port city. I had remembered this from the

sender address on the food package he had courageously delivered one Christmas to me. I went there and for several days looked up the name “Biebow” in telephone directories for every town *near* Luebeck; then in the evenings I made phone calls. The responses varied from a polite “No, you’ve got the wrong party,” to an angry and suspicious “The war is over. There are no more Nazis here!”

But one day, the tedious work paid off. A young man thought I might be looking for his grandfather. He referred me to his father, Heinrich Biebow, living on the family farm about fifty kilometers south of Luebeck. I reached Heinrich that same evening. For Paul, I had come too late: he had died a few years earlier. Heinrich, a man my own age, was indeed the one who had served as a soldier on the Russian front and was the son Paul had told me about in Ujazd, the construction site where we had met. I invited Heinrich and his wife to lunch and to offer some small gifts I brought from Italy as a token of appreciation for his father’s kindness. But I also wanted to find out more about this gentle, humane man. I wanted to understand what had motivated him to be so kind to a young stranger; I wanted to learn what his attitude had been towards Jews or his position vis-à-vis the Nazis and the war.

First, the son gave me his father’s picture, taken in Ujazd. Then, we talked about our families and our present lives. Finally we turned to his father. He told me that Paul had never wanted to *mitmachen* (take part in or collaborate) with the Nazis and because of his political convictions, he had ended up in jail a couple of times. He had not volunteered for paramilitary service, but had been drafted. The son also told me that he and his father had never agreed politically. What he did not tell me, but which I read between the lines, was that he, Heinrich, was an unrepentant Nazi. Later, we exchanged a

couple of Christmas cards. I attached a gift check to one card, but it was never acknowledged. Then our brief correspondence stopped. I guess neither of us felt comfortable keeping in contact.

Ignac and I continued to be good friends until his passing in 2000. After a year of engineering studies, Ignac left Italy for Australia, invited by distant relatives. There, he embarked on several remarkable professional careers. First he became an engineer, then a physicist, then a university lecturer, and finally, a practicing medical doctor. In 1993, Ignac wrote his memoir, *In the Footsteps of Memory*, in which he describes our joint planning and preparation for escape, his and Stasiek's escape from the Blizyn camp, and their struggles for survival in Warsaw and Riga.¹⁷ The book credits my trail-blazing escape and help in Warsaw as the key to his and Stasiek's survival. Ignac told me that my letter to him had given him the needed encouragement and the final impulse to escape from the camp. Of course, just having an address of a friend outside the camp, was in itself a trump card. It was a critical element for an escape and survival on the Aryan side.

Ignac wrote his book in a great hurry, under pressure due to his deteriorating health: he was already at the threshold of a debilitating illness that eventually led to his demise. He passed away in his post-war home country of Australia, after suffering for several years from Lou Gehrig disease.

Krysia and I lost track of each other during the Warsaw Uprising: because she was a woman, she had been allowed to remain in occupied Poland, while I and all other young Polish males were taken to Germany, to camps. After the war, when we accidentally found each other at the Jewish Committee in the Warsaw suburb of Praga,

¹⁷ Ignatius Bierzynski Burnett, *In the Footsteps of Memory*. Camberwell, Victoria: Morescope Publishing, 1993.

the joy of finding each other, alive and whole, was beyond description. In the Uprising, so many people died, so many lost limbs or were wounded. The population had been almost totally dispersed, with many men and women sent to concentration camps. To find a loved one alive and well in this topsy-turvy, confused situation was a miracle. After our encounter in Praga I lost track of Krysia. In the excitement of having found each other, we forgot to exchange our new names and addresses. In the underground, I knew only her first name, Krysia; she in turn, knew me as Matysiak, a name I had shed the day the war ended. Thus, we lost each other.

Then one day, at a gathering of survivors in Los Angeles, I mentioned Krysia's name to some other people, and somebody said, "I know her; her last name is Mucznik"; he had heard that she now lived in Switzerland. I tracked her down and in the late 1980s, I flew to Zurich to meet with her again. Several visits and contacts by correspondence and phone, followed.

I wish I could tell Krysia's story here—her many heroic deeds during the war and her post-war life—but I don't know it. She would not tell it to me. Only now and then would she drop a few tidbits. But I do know that the years after the war were sad ones. She and her husband stayed in Poland till the early 1970s, while most of their friends had already left in the first years after the war. When they finally arrived in the West, most of their friends were already well settled and had become professionals or achieved success in various endeavors. Krysia and her husband felt as though they had missed the boat.

Krysia wanted to be remembered the way she was during the war years: young, pretty, and full of vitality; they were her happy years. Her past was made of deeds, many heroic deeds; her present consisted only of images of that past, with little future—at least,

that was how she felt. During my visits I found her sad and depressed, with little will to live. Although she had received the Partisan Cross (*Krzyz Partyzancki*) from the Polish government, she felt abandoned and forgotten by her comrades from the Underground, the organization she had served so faithfully and courageously.

Krysia and I remained close friends, joined by that special bond, until her death, in Zurich in 1999.

I searched for the Szokalski family from the time the war ended, but it was not easy to find them. Because they had signed the *Volksdeutsche* list, they chose to—or had to—leave their hometown of Tomaszow, and they left no forwarding address. When I did discover their new home, it was fifty years later and I found only Lucja, the daughter.

While in Warsaw in 1993, I remembered that the Szokalski family had been Protestants and that gave me a clue on how to track them down: through the Protestants of Tomaszow. The next morning I took the first train there. From the station, I went straight to the only Protestant church in town, to see the bishop. He had no information about the Szokalskis but he gave me the names of the few remaining “old-timers” in the church who might remember them. I visited each one on the list. On the fifth stop I had a stroke of luck; I found a man who knew that Lucja had moved to Bytom. I went straight to the post office and found her telephone number. Lucja answered the phone.

“Do you remember a young boy whom you and your parents harbored in your garden, in 1943?” I asked.

“Of course, I remember!” she exclaimed. “We often wondered what happened to you. We did get a couple of postcards but then we lost track of you.” I told her I was coming to visit, today, “right now,” but she objected.

“Oh, my God! No, not today! No! No! My hair is in such a mess. I have to go to the beauty parlor first. You can come tomorrow at the earliest,” she responded in an agitated voice. But I would not hear of it. Half an hour later, I was on a bus to Bytom. With my heart pounding and a bouquet of twelve red roses in my hand, I reached her ground-floor apartment. When we saw each other we both had tears in our eyes. We embraced. Her hair was just fine!

After a modest dinner, we recounted, chatted, and reminisced. It was not easy. We had to revisit the most difficult events of our lives, hers and mine. We had to cover a half a century of events. She told me her family’s dilemma at war’s end: the Poles considered them traitors because they had signed the list and they feared retribution, especially by their neighbors. On the other hand, they did not want to follow the defeated Nazi army into Germany, for they felt very Polish and that Poland was their homeland. Without a clear destination, they abandoned their city of birth, leaving behind their home, their business and most of their possessions. Finally, they settled in Bytom, a mining city in southeast Poland, near where the border with Germany had been before the war and where many other Germans or ethnic Germans, like the Szokalskis, now lived.

Happy to have finally reunited with Lucja, I started a friendly correspondence with her and offered her financial help. In one of the first letters Lucja wrote that she was surprised and embarrassed by the offer of help:

“But it was my mother who helped you, not me,” she protested. Then, with a touch of shyness and a bit of coyness she wanted to know: “Does your wife know about the checks you are sending me?”

Shortly after my return home, I applied to Yad Vashem, via the local Israeli consulate, to list the Szokalski family as “Righteous Among the Nations.” When I wrote to her about it, she first sidestepped the issue and then subtly indicated her opposition to it. She did not want the expected publicity. This was not out of modesty; she did not want her friends or neighbors to know. This attitude of wanting to hide one’s help to Jews during the war was not a common one, but neither was it unique. A sad commentary on the place and time.

Friedl passed away, in Vienna, on October 1, 2002. Her daughter Gabi notified me of her passing and the funeral arrangements, via a brief note.

I have lost contact with Marianne in the late ‘90s. One day, my phone calls were no longer answered and the traditional exchange of letters before Christmas stopped.

Although I did not meet up with any of my comrades from the Underground on my trip to Poland in 1993, this visit was crowned nonetheless: I was able to attend the spectacular 50th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, and more importantly, I had found Lucja Szokalski, a member of the family that played such an important role in my survival.

After a twelve-day stay in Poland, my journey came to an end, and I departed for home. Ludwik accompanied me to the Okecie airport. We had lunch, wrote a couple of postcards to people we knew, and said good-bye, several good-byes. A few minutes later Ludwik caught up with me again while I was standing in the departure line:

“One last good-bye, Zenek. One last embrace,” and he kissed me on both cheeks. It was the last. Ludwik died in 1998, before I had a chance to visit him again.

Often I find myself thinking about the human bonds that were formed during the war years—with Lucja and Ludwik, and Krysia and Paul, and Roman and Friedl and so many others, some whose names I no longer remember. These bonds were truly unique—timeless and unbreakable. They were unlike any friendships or relationships I had had before the war or have experienced since. They were not dependent on the strength or duration of the association during the war or the contacts since—they were solid, like the Rock of Gibraltar.

Recently, I relived the meaning and uniqueness of this bond when I had an unexpected visitor from Melbourne, Australia. It was Yola, the daughter of Maciej, my adopted wartime “uncle.” I first met Yola in 1943, on the Aryan side of Warsaw, when she was just a little girl. In the intervening sixty years we had seen each other only twice; otherwise we had not been in touch. Yet for both of us, the reunion was an emotional and exalting experience beyond words. Although our memories of events and places might have been somewhat dimmed, the bond between us was, and would remain, forever intact.

* * *

Escape from Nazi confinement in ghettos or camps was a viable option for only a few, but those who did escape had a much better chance to survive than those who remained in

confinement. (Of my own family and friends who escaped to the Aryan side of Warsaw – about twenty in total – seventeen succeeded in surviving the war).

I hope that this eyewitness account of the uncommon challenges, experiences and perils of living as an escapee under assumed identities in Poland and Austria - a phenomenon known in Nazi-occupied Europe as "living on the Aryan Side" - contributes to a better understanding of the history of this tragic period.